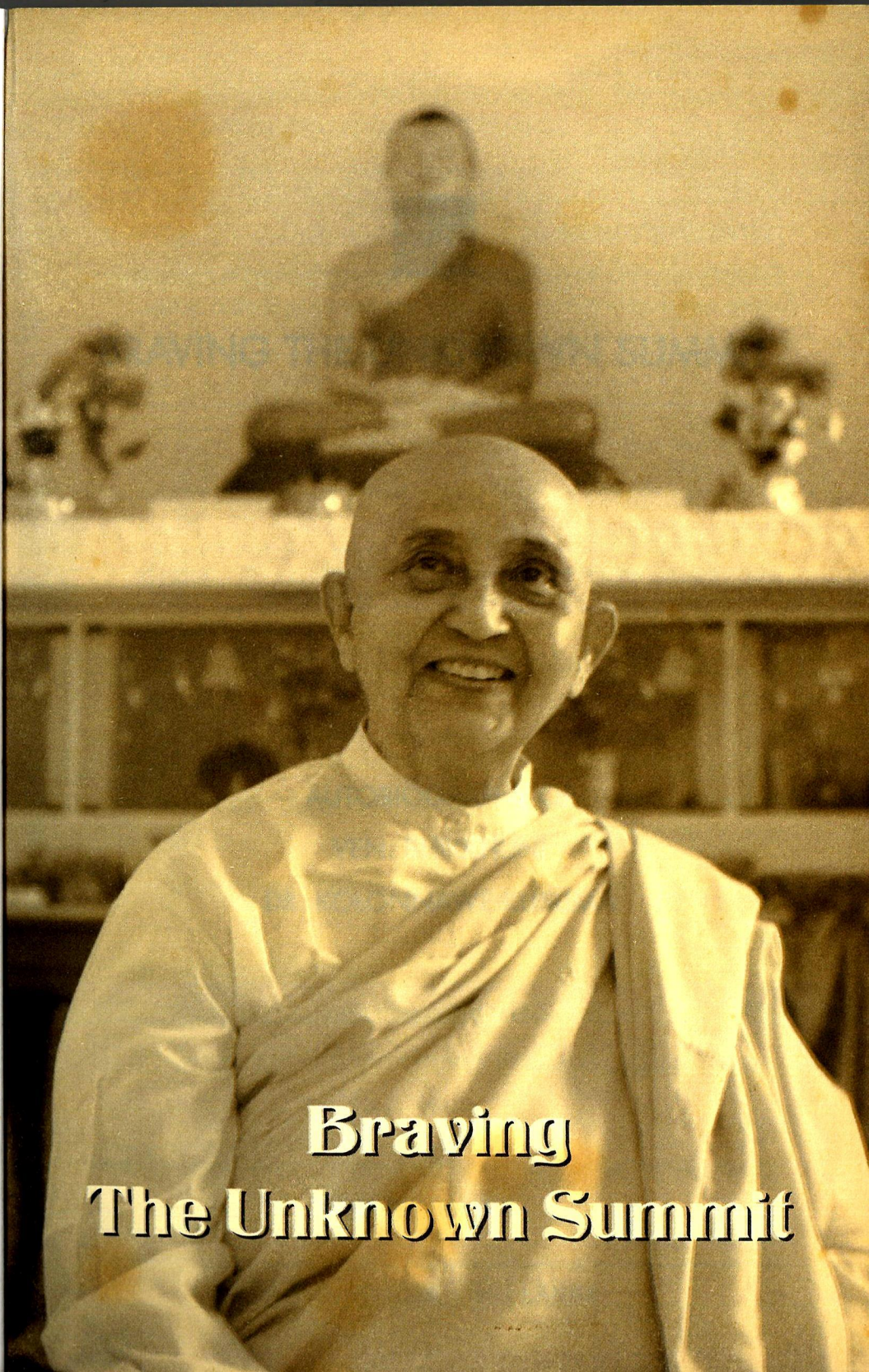
Braving The Unknown Summit

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

VEN. BHIKKHUNI

DR. KOLONNAWE KUSUMA


Braving
The Unknown Summit

BRAVING THE UNKNOWN SUMMIT

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

VEN. BHIKKHUNI

DR. KOLONNAWE KUSUMA

Akna Publishers

AKNA PUBLISHERS · SRI LANKA

© 2012 Akna Publishers

1st Edition

ISBN: 978-955-0393-02-2

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical or stored in any retrival system, without permission in writing from the author.

Cover image:
Oil painting by Nisansaka Karunaratne

Book cover and interior Design by:
Nisansala Karunarathne

Printed By:

Karunaratne & Sons (Pvt) Ltd.
67, UDA Industiral Estate.
Katuwana Road,
Homagama,
Sri Lanka
www. karusons.com

Published by:

Akna Publishers
No:1,Duplication Road,
Colombo: 03
Sri Lanka
aknapublishes@gmail.com

Printed with VOC free, non toxic vegetable oil-based environmentally-friendly ink.

CONTENTS

Foreword		vii
A word of thanks		xi
01.	Childhood	1
02.	School Days	14
03.	Professional Life	30
04.	Marriage	34
05.	Life at Maharagama and Mahamegha Gardens	36
06.	Tending to my mother	70
07.	Daughter's death	80
08.	Turning to Buddhism	88
09.	Efforts to develop the Dasasil Mata Movement (Ten Precept Buddhist Nun's Order)	97
10.	Research on Bhikkhuni Vinaya	110
11.	Interest in the resurrection of the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka	119
12.	The Bhikkhuni Order	127

13. My Ordination 131
14. My life at the Mahabodhi Centre, Saranath, India 150
15. Son's Death 160
16. My life at the Lanka Vipassana Centre at Wijerama Mawatha, Colombo 7 169
17. Missionary work abroad 175
18. The Ayya Khema Meditation Centre at Olaboduwa 188
19. Hostel for Bhikkhunis and Women and the Community Kitchen Project at Sadaham Sevana, Gothami Road, Borella 194
20 My life today 198
21. Conclusion 202

AFTERWORD

INDEX I - Publications 211
INDEX II - Appreciations 213
INDEX III - Photographs 221

FOREWORD

It is with great pleasure, passion and devotion that we write the foreword for the autobiography of Ven. *Bhikkhuni* Dr. Kolonnawe Kusuma.

She has been close to our hearts, as a friend, a teacher, a counselor, and a spiritual mentor, ever since we first met. The image of the smiling, soft spoken nun sitting cross legged on a low cushion in one of the side halls of the Vipassana Meditation Centre with a cluster of devout followers in front of her keenly listening, some taking down notes, is vivid in our memory. We followed these discussions and meditation classes many times and gained much needed insight in order to understand the *dhamma*.

Bhikkuni (as we fondly addressed her), had the ability of providing simple explanations for complex doctrinal matters, thereby imparting knowledge and generating much wisdom in the minds of our small group of doctors, engineers, lawyers, architects and other professionals who were searching for a true exposition of the *Buddha vacana*. It was precisely what we received from her.

The religious background of her childhood described in the book, her parents, grand parents and aunts who were devout Buddhists, association with erudite monks such as Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maithreya and the religious fervor prevailing at that time fulfilling *mangala kāranā* described in the *mangala sutta,* appear to have provided the necessary milieu for culturing noble qualities which have molded her entire life.

More we associated with her, the more we came to realize that she practices the teachings of the Buddha to the very letter.

Her smile, genuine, unadulterated and ever present shows the kindness and friendship that emanate from her heart. She never for a moment gets angry at anybody, whether it is the *"Bass Unnahe"* (Mason) who took money and never returned, or one of her disciples who reminiscent of *"Saccaka"*, went on asking unanswerable questions. Her mastery of patience was astonishing.

She was an excellent counselor for those tormented by a variety of scenarios that adversely impact their lives and relationships. Many who came from far and wide, were received with *mettha* and were comforted. They got relief and solace.

One of her often repeated sayings is, "Child, do not harbor anger, generate as much *mettha* as possible". She lives by what she preaches as a *"yathāvādi thathākāri"*.

In this autobiography, she describes how the people of Jaffna treated she and her family so well when they visited the peninsular and describes their kindness and expresses the sadness she felt for the suffering they underwent during the thirty years of the terrible ethnic conflict.

She condemns inhumane and violent acts towards fellow human beings based on ethnicity, religion or any other denominators. She considers that all human beings belong to one group described as *"manussa"* in the *sutta,* demonstrating how her thoughts revolve round universal loving kindness exactly as preached by the Buddha.

Her description of how tears came to her eyes when she walked on the soil on which Jesus Christ was crucified and how she praises such noble human beings, irrespective of their beliefs, further illustrates her feelings for the need for harmony between all religions.

In her life story she sees (and "experiences") death in different contexts. As a small child, that of the grandmother, too small to understand much, possibly generating curiosity and loneliness. As an older child she sees that of an innocent rabbit which shocks her, generating sadness, horror and revulsion.

As a mother, the death of her two children, a devastating experience to any ordinary being. She describes how *dhamma* and *bhāvanā* helped her in "seeing things as they are" and help her to cope with these calamities. She describes how she facilitated the two children to comprehend the realities of ill health, *vyādipi dukkha,* using different *suttas* such as *Dhamma chakka pavattana* or *Bhojjanṅga,* appropriate for the mindset of each child. She was so successful in that, the children never asked "Why did it happen to me?"

There is so much to learn from her writing for ordinary beings, such as us, the *puthujjana* who often face such events with foreboding, trepidation, sorrow, grief and lamentation, instead of accepting them with wisdom and equanimity, as she has done.

After being ordained as a *Bhikkhuni,* she contributed much in disseminating the word of the Buddha, both nationally and internationally, as she is an excellent communicator and a *dhamma kathika* who could hold the attention of large audiences of diverse personalities with different points of view. Her revolutionary nature demonstrated even as a schoolgirl, as described in the book, possibly generated enthusiasm and courage later in life, for her struggle for the betterment of the *Bikkhuni Sasana* in Sri Lanka for which she is totally committed and has made it her life's ambition and goal.

Ven. Bhikkuni Kusuma's autobiography, certainly is not a mere description of the life story of Buddhist nun, but a beautiful illustration to the world, of the experiences of a normal woman, who lives an exemplary life and is a guiding light for others.

We hope that these few words we have penned have done justice to the author and wish that Ven. Bhikkhuni Kolonnawe Kusuma would achieve her goal in this life and she would not face sorrow or misery in her journey through *saṅsāra* and attain enlightenment according to her aspirations.

Gitanjali & Lakshmen

Dr. Gitanjali Senanayake MBBS, MD (Radiology), MA (Buddhist Studies)
Dr. Lakshmen Senanayake MBBS, FRCOG, FSLCOG, MA (Buddhist Studies)

A WORD OF THANKS

I never did have any inclination or a particular need to write my life story. But now in my 82nd year, thanks to Dr. Kamalini Vijithananda Upasika, who with great enthusiasm and insistence, awakened my long forgotten past, I decided that it will be appreciated by at least some of my faithful friends and supporters all over the world, if I write of my experiences, so that they may benefit in some small way by understanding how to deal with problems that we face in day to day life. Even though my eyesight is failing and I am partially deaf due to old age, I decided to go ahead with this task, also because my chief disciple, Ven. Medhavini and my daughter Peshala were pleading with me that it was necessary to document the ups and downs of my

life, the things said and done, and various incidents that have made deep impressions in my life.

So here I am, seated in the open Verandah surrounded by Banyan, Bo, Na and Sal trees as well as many trees such as Jak, Coconut, Avocado and Arecanut, at my Ashram in Olaboduwa, recalling my past. Somewhat to my surprise, I find that the incidents in the past which at that time may have been so difficult and sad to deal with, now do not arouse any strong emotional response in my mind. The events that had made deep impressions on me seem to be long dead and gone, and I do not feel any strong likes or dislikes, or anger or sadness. Everything is buried in the sands of time, and I know that all of it will fade away with my death and dissolution. This also seems to be another reason why I should write it down for the benefit of the new generations. I know that life is but a temporary "station" or a stop in the infinite life and death process in Samsara. So if my life could be an inspiration to someone, then the writing of it will not be in vain.

I hope that this will also serve as a big vote of thanks to all who have helped me in numerous ways throughout my life. Without all of them, my family, my teachers and mentors, my friends, my colleagues, my helpers and all who touched my life in the smallest possible way, I could never have achieved all that I have said and done. So a very big "Thank you" to all of you and I hope you will pardon me if I am unable to mention each and everyone in this small volume because I would have to indeed do a huge publication if I were to do so in detail!

1

CHILDHOOD

My mother, who was named Emilia Bartholomeuz Rajapakse, was born in the South of Sri Lanka, in a place called Pallimulla in the Matara Town. She often spoke of her childhood, living in a spacious house called "Chandrawasa". Her mother's sister was married to her father's brother and both families lived together in this house, which was large enough to accommodate all her many siblings and cousins, who numbered may be over twenty. Behind the house flowed the Nilwala River, where all the children bathed, swam and played.

At that time as was the usual practice among the educated middle class, they were loyal subjects of the British who colonized Sri Lanka. This is reflected in their names since my three uncles were named Herman, Peter and Victor and my aunts, Sally, Therese, Lilian and Muriel. My three uncles worked as Government Servants, being respectively a Station Master of the Government Railways, an Accountant and a Civil Engineer. Of my aunts, as far as I remember, only Muriel married and the other three remained spinsters because they could not find a suitable "match" which came upto their high expectations. They dressed like prim Victorian ladies and had the typical "Pride and Prejudice" mentality and self esteem! But at the same time , they were deeply religious, being influenced by the contemporary Buddhist renaissance of that time. Buddhist Monks such as Migettuwatte Gunananda and Anagarika Dharmapala, finally influenced them so much that they changed their entire lifestyle and became very national minded and gave up wearing dresses and long skirts and adapted themselves to the Indian Saree. I remember my mother's wedding photograph, where she is wearing a Saree, carrying a bouquet of flowers, complete with a full veil, socks and shoes and gloves and sapphire and diamond jewellery.

My father hailed from Sarikkamulla, Panadura, a suburb of Colombo. His name was Don Cornelis Gunawardene, and similar to my mother's family, his siblings too all had British names, John, Phillip, Louis, Harmanis, etc. they were all skilled artists and wood carvers, and led a leisurely life, wasting their talents. Some of their exquisite wood carvings which were sent abroad at that time are still preserved in Museums in the UK and the USA.

However, my father who was educated at St. John's College, Panadura, took to his studies seriously and ended up as a Civil Engineer in the Government Public Works Department (PWD) and worked at the Government Factory in Kolonnawa. In his home town of Panadura he was well known as a Buddhist leader and a social worker. He established a school for the poor children of the area in his home at Panadura and taught the children free of charge until it was given recognition by the Government as a regular school and was established as the Taxila College in proper premises.

After marriage, my parents shifted to Kolonnawa, another suburb of Colombo, close to his place of work. At first they stayed in rented premises and subsequently they built their own home also in Kolonnawa, opposite the Kolonnawa Temple.

I was born on 9th October 1929, the third child of a family of five children and I had an elder sister and brother and a sister and brother younger to me. We all had proper Sinhalese names being, Sudharma, Keerthi, Kusuma, Mallika and Somachandra. I remember we had a comfortable and happy childhood, untouched by any major disasters. Since there were no TVs or computers, we had enough time to study, and memorise and cook and sew and create beautiful handicrafts. I used to spend hours enthralled with cross-stitch tapestry. There were no ready made garments to buy nor fast food restaurants round every corner like now. Life was slow and relaxed. In primary school apart from basic studies, I remember learning how to weave mats with long fronds of Coconut leaves. Tuition classes were unheard of and I am sure our

teachers would have been insulted if anyone suggested that their students needed any extra coaching!

My elder brother, Keerthi, was a real cricket fan, and his hobby was to collect pictures of famous cricket players of that time. I remember how he used to shout, "Come on, Captain of the Indian Team – Pataudi"!, even in his dreams. Even though he was quite intelligent and talented, he found no avenue to direct his abilities and as such he was very much into mischief making and rebelling against the rather straightlaced religious upbringing we had at home. He would annoy my mother by eating the prawn served for the *Buddha Pooja* and one day he picked up a firebrand from the fireplace and threw it at my elder sister, narrowly missing her. My elder sister who was anyway a somewhat conniving type, ran to my father and cried and complained that my brother was harassing her. Those were the days of corporal punishment, the popular maxim being, "Spare the rod and spoil the child", and so my father caned him properly on his outstretched palm. I felt so sorry for my brother and even though I was a mere child, I felt that it was very unfair to beat him like that. Along with this I also felt some aversion towards my sister for causing such unnecessary trouble. I also remember that my brother refused to come into the house and slept in the Verandah all night.

In those days it was a routine that the whole family must prostrate themselves and chant at the Shrine Room before partaking of dinner. The dinner table was the meeting place for the whole family and generally everyone would sit together and

observe nice table manners and chat together happily. It is indeed sad to see that such rituals are no longer observed. Now most families I see, sit before the TV and eat their microwaved fast food after a hard day's work, before falling into bed, exhausted. The children are isolated and do not have the feeling of being wanted, and the parents have no time to listen to their tales, to share knowledge or have fun together. The children left to their own devices become hard and uncaring and resent advice and correction. They become victims of mass media, addicted to the internet and even pornography and other harmful pastimes, thus losing their childhood forever. There is no one to tell them that this is not real life nor that it is unnatural and abnormal. It is the task of every responsible human being to counter this trend of crass consumerism, corruption and unfair competition and show the way to Right Living, peace and harmless enjoyment, which is necessary and acceptable to all human beings.

My childhood was secure and happy, under the strict surveillance of parents and elders. I spent my time singing and reading and listening to the radio. The school work too was not stressful with the teachers giving the students all possible support. In my early childhood I remember going to the temple across the road with my grandmother. She was named Francina Devendra and she was a person who was devoted to the *Buddha Dhamma*. At first I only played with sand under the *Bo* tree while she worshipped. But by and by, I too learned the chants .The stanzas she repeated while worshipping at the temple were unique to her native area of Matara, in the deep south. Later on I found that her

chants were identical to the stanzas chanted every morning at the Buddhist Maha Vihara Temple of Ven. Kirinde Dhammananda Maha Thero in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Kirinde is also a small town in the Matara District, which was the birth place of the Ven. Maha Thero. So when I happily join in the chanting at the Maha Vihara at 06:30 a.m. everyday, my mind always goes back to my grandmother.

I also remember the time when I was about three years and my sister, Mallika, was about an year and half. We slept on mats on the floor, probably because of bed-wetting or falling off the bed. Early morning we were given a bottle feed and when I finished my milk, I would shout, "*Bothale, bothale*" ("Bottle, bottle"). Then my small sister would try to imitate me shouting "*Bole, bole*" ("Ball, ball") to everyone's amusement. I remember the servants teasing her because she couldn't pronounce the word "*Bothale*" properly.

Our house in Kolonnawa was very spacious and comfortable, with a large garden in front. Behind the house was the imposing fuel tank installation of Shell Gas. My father was an expert on timber and he used the best quality wood for building our house. I remember that we had doors of Burma Teak which were 7 feet high and the house had about 15 large windows opening out to the garden. The hall and the sitting room had wall to wall rattan carpets covering the floor. The only drawback was that there was no pipe borne water service to the house. We had an old fashioned well and there were two boys who used to draw water and fill up the large water storage tanks. However, if there was a period of

prolonged drought, the well ran dry. Then we had to go a fair distance by car to Fife Road in Colombo where my grandmother aunts and uncles lived at that time. We enjoyed the luxury of bathing in the shower. However, after some time they shifted to Nugegoda which was quite far from our place. After that, during the dry season, we had to go to a public well at Meetotamulla for bathing. My father would load the car with all of us including the servants, and we would bathe in buckets and buckets of water drawn up by the servants. This was called the "One Cent Well" because each person had to pay one cent to have a bath. It was great fun to go and bathe there.

At my grandmother's house in Nugegoda Old Kesbewa Road, there was an upstair balcony overlooking the narrow gauge Kelani Valley Railway line, where the *"Punchi Kochchiya"* (Small Train) used to run. My great pastime was to watch the trains go by. There was also a nice wooden stairway, which made a pleasant bang every time a person climbed up or down. I felt very proud of myself when I was allowed to climb up all by myself and it gave me great pleasure to run up and down the staircase all day long, whenever we visited there. So my uncles used to tease me saying that my father will have to pay money for each time I go up and come down!. I was sorry that it would cost my father money, and being so loyal to him, I stopped my stair climbing, to the amusement of all. I was also very happy to sit with my grandmother in her little shrine room where she did her daily devotions and chanting. So it was a great treat to visit my grandmother's house.

I remember the occasion when I was barely six years old, and decided to drive my uncle's car. It was parked on the sloping drive way and I slowly sneaked in and sitting on the driver's seat, started to meddle with the steering wheel and the gears, unknowingly shifting them. All of a sudden to my horror, I found the car moving slowly down the slope and started to scream at the top of my voice. Luckily my uncle came rushing and managed to avert a nasty accident. I still remember the way all the adults admonished me on my foolhardy ways!

One sad memory of my younger days was the passing away of our beloved grandmother. Even though I was too young to understand the real significance of death, I knew that I would never see her again by the way my mother and other adults were sorrowing and crying. Those days there was no embalming of dead bodies. So I remember that large blocks of ice were placed under and around the coffin, since the body had to be kept for three days until all the relatives gathered for the funeral. Even though now a dead body could be preserved for months with embalming, still no one has found a chemical to prevent death, even with all the advancements of science and technology!

As mentioned before, my father was the Engineer in Charge, working under the British Chief Engineer at the Government Factory in Kolonnawa. It was the time of the Industrial Revolution in Europe and our Colonial Masters lost no time in installing the Government Factory with all the best equipment. Most of the bridges and roadways were built by the factory engineers, and some of them such as the Bolgoda Bridge, Katugastota old Bridge, Kalutara Bridge and the Thoppuwa Bridge on the Chilaw road are still in existence, portraying

the excellence of their work. The Galle Light house too, was built by them amongst many other infrastructure constructions. In addition, all the machinery and industrial equipment right upto pins and needles were crafted there. The Government factory was one of the mainstays of the economy of the country at that time. I remember how my father would proudly announce that it was they who built it, whenever we went over the roller bridge at Moratuwa on the Galle Road.

My father was loved by all the factory workers and I remember how on every New Years' day, they used to visit our home carrying sheaves of Betel Leaves to pay their respects to him.We were also pleased because they used to bring sweetmeats and gifts for us and my mother always welcomed them and treated them to high tea. Then my father would make a small speech thanking them for all their support and co-operation and they would depart happily. This I think ensured that all the workers worked like one family, without any unions and organizations to cause any kind of disruption. Occasionally, I would get a chance to go inside my father's workplace and I was awed by the machinery and the deafening sound they made. My father's colleagues, many of them Britishers, used to welcome me and show me around the place.

Even though we were under British rule, we preserved our ancient cultural heritage which was mainly based on Buddhist values and ideals. The extended families of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins gave a lot of security and comfort, and the children were generally well cared for and looked after. It was actually a time of Buddhist cultural renaissance after nearly 400 years of foreign domination and many leaders were emerging, inspiring a resurgence of Buddhist values and education.

In the Kindergarden we attended, we had books that showed us right and wrong and advised us to worship our mother and father and elders and respect them at all times. We also attended the Sunday School held at the Temple where it instilled in our young minds how to lead a virtuous life. We memorized verses from Buddhistic texts such as *"Lowada Sangarawa"*, *"Subhasitaya"* and *"Lokopakaraya"*, in addition to Buddhist Stanzas from the *Dhammapadaya* and *Buduguna Alankaraya*. Of course, we did not know all the meanings of those verses, even though we memorized them and could repeat them by heart.

Apart from this, I loved to recite poems and verses such as *"Pal Kavi"* (Poems recited by farmers when they stayed all night in their little huts to safeguard the crops from wild animals), *"Seepada"* (Ethnic Poetry) and *"Goyam Kavi"* (Poems sung at the Paddy fields while harvesting). These were quite ancient verses mostly handed down by word of mouth and all of them had some kind of moral and cultural value. I had this special ability to memorize any poem if I heard it only once or twice, and thus I had a fairly good collection of verses, which I would sing and recite all day long.

When we went visiting relations, very often my parents would ask us to recite something. Being quite fearless and guileless, I was ever willing to do so. My sisters, who were not interested in reciting, were however not pleased that I was acclaimed by the elders and they rebuked me sometimes. Once I remember at school assembly the Principal invited any girl to come up and

recite a poem. I looked around and since no one volunteered, I walked up to the stage and recited a poem. The audience was quite happy with my recital and clapped loudly. But my elder sister, Sudharma, who was also in the audience was annoyed by my bold gesture, and having severely scolded me, also complained to my parents about my audacity and told them that I had disgraced her at school by mispronouncing the words! Never ever did I venture to do such a thing again at school. But I did not give up my ways and I also used to argue with my neighborhood children so cleverly that one day my mother overhearing me remarked to my father that I should become an advocate or a lawyer!. She also said that I was probably so forward because I was born under the star sign of Leo according to my Horoscope. (Birth Chart).

On *Poya Days* (Full Moon days) my mother and aunts used to observe *Sil* (Eight Precepts) at home and all of us had to sit on mats spread on the ground and spend the whole day and night with them, listening to them repeating from *Dhamma* books, chanting and telling us *Jataka* Stories. We were not allowed to sleep during that night and I remember my mother saying very firmly that if I sleep, my "*Sil*" will be stolen by robbers! They used to recite the *Satipatthana Sutt*a and even though I could hardly read my letters, I learnt most parts of it by heart, by hearing it so often. I used to run about chanting,

"Ghāna viññānam loké piyarupam sāta rupam etthe sā tanha uppajjamānā uppajjati, ettha nivīsamānā nivīsati"

I would have been about six years old at that time. When completing my M.A. Degree nearly forty years later, where I did a research on the Satipatthana Sutta Text, my childhood memories came alive.

I used to be an active and alert child and I remember my parents asking me to recite verses when I was in bed at night. I used to recite non-stop and suddenly realize that everyone else was fast asleep! I was never moody or lonely, and if any visitors came to the house, I was the first to go and greet them and then talk with them, while my sisters were shy and generally avoided speaking to people, especially to strangers. Some of the visitors even used to remark that, "This child must have come from the *Devaloka* (Heavenly abode)".

One thing I did not much care for was eating! So I was always rather thin and wiry. Sometimes our neighbors used to carry me to their houses and feed me Rice and Dhall curry. This of course I used to enjoy much more than any meal at home, and when they asked me,

"Is the food tasty?"

I used to reply,

"Yes. As tasty as the sweet oranges from heaven"

I also used to be fond of animals, dogs and cats being the favourites. I remember once how we "adopted" a dog which was abandoned by his owners when they shifted house and went away from the area. We used to feed him and look after him and then

one day he tried to swallow a large fish bone which got stuck in his throat. The poor animal was choking and gasping, unable even to shut his mouth. I simply could not bear to see his suffering and despite the warnings given by the others, I put my hand right into his throat and managed to take out the piece of bone. After that he became my devoted pet, following me everywhere!

My mother's brother who was a Station Master and his wife were childless. So they would come and take me from time to time to stay with them at their home. I was quite happy to stay with them for months on end. I also heard that they had wanted to adopt me legally, since there were three girls in my family, but my parents never gave any heed to that idea. But I remember enjoying myself watching my uncle play tennis, seeing the trains passing by the house and looking at the engines turning round and round on the station Turntable. I still remember their bungalow at Kadugannawa in the Kandy District.

2

SCHOOL DAYS

I first attended school at the age of 3 and I went to the Kolonnawa Government Junior School, close by to our house. I studied at this school up to the third standard in the Sinhalese medium. I remember the Head Master, Mr. Ranasinghe, who had two daughters named Kamala and Daya. Later on, Kamala became the wife of Colonel Rajapakse, who was the Principal of Ananda College, Colombo.

Our Class Master, who was also a Mr. Rajapakse, was quite a stern looking, dark and big built person. I remember we were in awe of him. He had an ink pot on his desk and it used to fascinate me to see how he dipped his pen with a "G" nib into the ink pot and started to write. We had to write on our slates with the slate pencils. One day, in the absence of the teacher I decided to experiment with the ink pot and the pen and got caught to the Master, who looked at me over his spectacles, and ordered me back to my seat. I remember how scared I was that I would get punished by him!

When I got promoted to the 4th Standard, my parents decided to send me to the Ananda Balika Vidyalaya in Colombo, which was one of the leading girls' school in the country at that time. I remember the last day at my old school, going to each and every teacher and worshipping them and saying good bye. Ananda Balika Vidyalaya was an English Medium School, and since we had studied previously in the Sinhalese medium, I was admitted to the 3rd standard and my younger sister, Mallika, to the 2nd standard.

I was well up to standard in all the subjects except English, but managed to catch up very soon on my studies. My great joy was English poetry, which opened up a new world for me. One day, my elder sister taught me some poems which I had to learn, and then wrote them out in her neat handwriting in my book. However, she warned me not to tell the teacher that it was she who wrote the poems and to say that I wrote them myself. The next day, our teacher, who had a very good idea about our respective

handwriting, asked me who was it that who wrote the poems in my book. I remember she was an Indian lady and when she asked me this direct question, I got so scared and confused that in my broken English, I stammered that it was I who wrote it. I really had to pay a big price for that little lie because the teacher scolded me no end in front of the class and called me a liar. Then my class mates looked upon me as a bad girl and I was rejected and ridiculed by all of them. I was so ashamed that it was almost impossible to bear. But I think it taught me a good lesson for life, to avoid lying at all costs, because it could result in dire consequences!

I suffered for almost one whole year in class because of the stigma and then came the end of year exams. For the English Oral Test, the students had to go up on stage and recite and sing to the tune of the Piano. I being the Black Sheep, was the last student to be called up and as usual, performed with my usual vigour since I was word perfect. The teacher could hardly believe that I could perform so well after having rather neglected me throughout the year and then commenced to question me in English. Luckily for me, I was able to reply her perfectly and she immediately changed her opinion of me and praised me very much and held me up as an exemplary student. I was so happy that my period of ostracization was over at last!

We were sent to school by car and at that time it was quite a luxury. There was only one other student who came by car, and that was Lakshmi Kuruppu, the daughter of Jayaweera Kuruppu, a well known State Councillor. I remember she was nearly always the first in class and I was a close second. Her younger brother

Raja Kuruppu, now a well known Buddhist Social Worker and Public Speaker on Buddhism, is still in constant touch with me since we used to conduct the weekly Buddhist Forum aired by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and he often invites me to give public talks, since he is the President of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), Borella and the President of the Servants of the Buddha Organisation. His sister Lakshmi passed away some time ago, but we still cherish her memory.

I remember another occasion when I got punished by Miss. Kerner, our Geography teacher because I had not learnt my geography lesson for the day. I had to stay after school to do extra work, and felt very guilty because my sisters too had to stay back because of me. Anyway, when the question time came, Miss Kerner asked me,

"How often are the Rubber Trees tapped for sap?"

I replied promptly,

"Every other day"

Miss. Kerner was so pleased by my prompt answer that she let me go off without any further questioning. Of course I got a sound scolding from my sisters, but I didn't mind because I knew that I had pleased the teacher, in spite of the disgrace of being kept back in school after hours.

In this way we studied with great enthusiasm thanks to our teachers, who gave us special attention all the time. We were also influenced by educated parents at home. There were certainly no tuition classes or extra lessons, and actually hardly any home work as far as I can remember.

Our house was situated in front of the Kolonnawa Raja Maha Vihara (Kolonnawa Temple). At that time, Ven. Kotikawatte Saddhatissa was a novice monk who was a frequent visitor to our house and he used to come for "*pindapatha*" (Alms). I remember begging my mother to allow me also to serve *pindapatha*. In those days it was a familiar sight to see monks going on alms rounds with their bowls. Occasionally, they used to come in the evenings too, to collect "*Gilanpasa*" (medicinal drinks to be taken in the evenings since they did not partake of any dinner) and coconut oil for lighting lamps. People were so happy to fill their alms bowls with coconut oil that sometimes my mother would laughingly remark that the small novice monks had oil spilt all over their robes!

My mother, who taught at the Sunday School for over nineteen years, was deeply religious. Her favourite newspaper was the "*Sinhala Bauddhaya*"("Sinhalese Buddhist"), which had a great national and religious fervor, which was much appreciated by my mother. The founder editor of this publication was Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala, President of the Mahabodhi Society.The paper consisted of articles by many scholar monks and lay persons well versed in Buddhism at that time.

My siblings and I all attended the Sunday School regularly, even though my elder brother usually created a big stir every Sunday refusing to go and only did so with the general intervention of my father. My elder sister was a good student, however, who was always praised by the teachers. The *Abhidhamma* taught at the Sunday School, compared to today, was of a very high standard.

We learnt Pali Stanzas by heart and texts such as the *Dhammapada* and *Lovada Sangarawa*, really showed us the correct path. Thus we were disciplined and learnt to respect our parents, teachers and elders. There were constant reminders on good behaviour, frugality and chastity, which taught us to be satisfied with little and we grew up without frustrations and stresses, unlike the children of nowadays.

Pali Language was a main subject of the curriculum and in the 6th Standard, I remember studying Pali Grammar and also translating Pali into Sinhalese and English. Miss. Ratnapala, who taught us Pali at the Sunday School, later became the Principal of Ananda Balika Vidyalaya in Colombo. My mother taught Buddhism and Abhidhamma and some of her students won Gold Medals year after year at the yearly examinations conducted by the YMBA (Young Men's Buddhist Association).

My mother was also the President of the "*Kulagana Samitiya*" (Women's Society) at the Wimalaramaya Temple in Wellampitiya close by. Here an annual "*Perahara*" (Procession) was conducted in honour of Ven. Sanghamitta Theri, under the patronage of the Women's society. My father's elder brother, who was an expert wood carver, had carved a statue of Ven. Sanghamitta out of a huge block of wood, and this statue was carried at the head of the procession. I remember that the statue was kept at our house, covered with a cloth, at other times.

We children walked drawing the cart on which the statue of Ven. Sanghamitta was placed, and which was decorated with a lot of coloured bulbs powered by a generator. We also sang songs

composed specially in praise of Ven. Sanghamitta and were quite proud to be the centre of attraction for the multitude of people gathered on either side of the road to watch the procession. From Wellampitiya, the procession paraded the streets at night, for about 3-4 miles before returning to the temple. I remember it was quite resplendent with decorated elephants, dancers and drummers, with my father's car following behind in case anyone got sick or needed some help. One team of upcountry dancers came from our estate at Melsiripura, and we had to provide them with board and lodgings at our home.

Once when I was about ten years old, I overheard my mother saying that we will have to feed the dancers when they return late at night after the *Perahera*. Since all the servants too were taking part in the procession, it was decided that we would buy bread for dinner that night. However, it was too late to buy any bread even though my mother tried everywhere, and since she had to be at the procession, being the President of the Association, she had to leave the house in haste. I felt so sad for the dancers who would come in so tired and hungry that I went and asked my father what we could do.

"Can you do something?"

He asked. So I gave up the idea of going in the procession, and came home and cooked a large pot of rice all by myself on the open hearth and then scraped a coconut and made a Dhall curry, the best I could do and being quite exhausted, simply fell asleep. The next morning, I asked my mother what happened to all the rice and curry I had cooked. She smiled and said,

"*Aiyo Duwe*, (Oh daughter) the dancers ate all of it and we had to prepare even more food to feed everyone else".

I still wonder how I managed such a feat at that tender age. Maybe this is why I am still a good cook and it gives me great satisfaction to give food to people, especially if they are hungry. As a matter of fact, I cook some basic rice and curry and feed large numbers of poor people in the neighbourhood almost on a daily basis at my Ashram. I also have a dream to build a Community Kitchen at Sadaham Sevana in Colombo, where about 200 meals could be provided daily for monks, nuns and lay people visiting the temple. I certainly think that cooking and sewing are rewarding pastimes for women, and the skills gained thereby do help in achieving higher things in later life.

In 1939, when I was in the 6th Standard, the Second World War broke out. I think I may have been about ten years old then. As I mentioned before, behind our house was the Fuel Installation where there were many huge tanks filled with petrol ready for distribution islandwide. There were strong rumours that the enemy would target these tanks and cause a huge carnage. My parents were really scared as added to this fear, there were constant announcements over the radio to evacuate Colombo, which was supposed to be bombed any day. So we closed up our house at Kolonnawa and shifted to Melsiripura, in the Kurunegala District, where my father had an estate of 100 acres of paddy, in the middle of which our estate bungalow was situated.

We had to stay nearly one year at Melsiripura, and to the delight of my brothers, we did not go to school during this time. We had a wonderful time, messing about in the paddy fields, being looked after by all the workers. I got really used to all the paddy cultivation activities during this time. I was given a small winnower (Named "*Kulla*" in Sinhalese) and the village women who came to winnow paddy were only too happy to teach me how to use it to remove the husks and broken pieces of grain and extract the nice, clean full grains of rice from the paddy they pounded with the pestle and mortar. They par boiled the paddy in huge cauldrons and dried it in the hot sun on long "*Magal Peduru*" ("*Magal*" Mats), turning it again and again with their hands to ensure even drying, before pounding it to get the rice grains. Everything was done manually those days, since no machines were used in paddy work. Ploughing, harvesting, threshing (removing the paddy grains from the straw), the only "machines" used were large water buffaloes, who, along with their human masters toiled day and night too, during harvesting time.

We played on the mountains of straw stacked up on the "*Kamatha*" (Threshing floor) till late at night under the Kerosene oil lamps, listening to the workers singing and driving the buffaloes round and round. It was a year of valuable experience and education for all of us who were used to only urban city living before. Sometimes our cousins and friends too used to visit and I remember my mother serving sumptuous meals, despite it being a time of war since we had vegetables and fruits in plenty, all garden fresh, and of course, rice, and enough women in the neighbourhood

to do the cooking. I remember my mother's gingelly balls (Sesame seed balls) with pure *kitul jaggery.* (Fudge made from the sap of the *Kitul* Palm flowers). I think my young mind absorbed every detail of this living off the land and even now I love planting, being somewhat of a good "agriculturist"!

We used to race along the "*Niyara*" (paddy field bunds), fall and get buried in thick mud and get pricked by thorny "*Nidikumba*" plants endlessly. Even though we were forbidden to climb the "*Weeraba Rock*" close by, which had a jungle infested with wild animals and venomous serpents, we used to climb it secretly. I remember one incident when I reared a tiny baby rabbit caught from the jungle, feeding it with a piece of cotton wool dipped in milk. Her cage was a box fitted with wire netting. One day the cage got wet, so I cleaned it and put it out in the garden in the sun. A little while later when I looked into the cage, to my dismay, I saw that the little rabbit was dead with wide open staring eyes. Hearing my cries, it being a Sunday, the neighbourhood people who were going to the Sunday Fair, stopped and looked and said that it had been stung by a serpent through a small broken corner in the mesh. They also said,

"Wait, the serpent will surely return for the prey in a little while"

And sure enough, a large Cobra was slithering round, coming towards the cage. I stopped my crying because I was petrified with fear and then one man quickly grabbed my little pet and threw it in the direction of the snake and the cobra took it in its mouth and started swallowing it, which took about half an hour, while we all watched it with fascinated horror. Once the rabbit had been

swallowed whole, the snake found it hard to move and then a man took a long pole and beat the cobra to death and then they got together and burnt its writhing body. I remember how stunned I was with grief and fear at all this terrible cruelty, and it took me a long time to get over the whole episode.

It was vastly interesting how the simple villagers who came to work at our estate found very practical solutions for their day-to-day problems. I remember the trouble we had with vast hordes of monkeys who used to descend on the estate and sometime create havoc, stripping all the fruit trees and damaging the crops. But the final straw was when they jumped into the shed where the workers kept their lunches of rice and curry, neatly wrapped in banana leaves and had a grand feast! The men were so incensed that they thought of killing off a few of the pests, since some of them had firearms, but knowing my parents' aversion to such a course of action, they devised a much more effective, yet simple, punishment. They prepared a large pot of "*Kiributh*" (Milk rice made of thick coconut milk, raw rice and salt to taste) and plucked large handfuls of "*Kochchi*" (the strongest and spiciest of chillie peppers), which they ground into a thick paste. Then they made balls of *Kiributh* adding a generous spoonful of the chillie into the middle of each. Then the tempting balls of milk rice were put on a tray and kept in the shed for the monkeys to see. Of course the inevitable happened. The monkeys spying the generous treat were quick to arrive and grabbed the food, stuffing the rice balls into their mouths in great haste! It took some time for them to realize that something was very wrong! The burning hot, spicy chillies

gave them a terrible shock and every time they touched their mouths and rubbed their hands elsewhere, the burning spread all over their bodies! Finally, they could not bear it any more and ran off and jumped into the *"Ela"* (the water course that irrigates the paddy fields) and disappeared for ever, never to return again!

Sometimes I meet my cousins and friends when I visit various countries now, and still they speak of their visits to our estate at Melsiripura, and say that they were some of the most enjoyable times of their lives. I also remember that my father never used any insecticides, pesticides or weedicides. Neither did he encourage the use of artificial manure in our paddy fields. Actually pest control during that time was quite a strange, if effective, practice. An old *Kapurala* ("Magic man" for want of a better word) would come to the pest infested area, light lamps, offer flowers and chant a lot of unfamiliar verses. I guess somehow it must have worked because this was the only remedy used against pests, which otherwise would have ruined the entire crop.

Then one fine day the Second World War ended, and my parents decided that it was time for us to get back to our "normal" life in Colombo and school. My memories of the war time is limited to seeing hundreds of tiny airplanes flying in formation like a flock of birds to bomb the city of Colombo. We were amazed at this sight, but later learnt that there were only a few actual airplanes laden with bombs. The rest of the flock were just rubber models of planes to confuse the ground attack forces and instill fear into the enemy. Later father told us that even though the target of the Japanese

who came to bomb the city was actually the Government Factory, by some error the bombs fell on the Lunatic Asylum, where a lot of the inmates unfortunately died and the buildings were ruined. Luckily the Kolonnawa oil tanks were well camouflaged, painted green and as the Colombo City was also under a complete blackout, they were saved.

So we came back home to Kolonnawa, and resumed our interrupted home life. Since only a few schools were in session, my father admitted me and my younger sister to Ananda College, Colombo, which was a leading boy's school at that time. The Principal then was Mr. A.B. Perera. My life at Ananda College is truly an unforgettable experience. In my class there were about 40 boys and just three or four girls. We sat in the front row close to the teacher, but could not entirely escape the ragging we received constantly! Paper balls, notes, whistles, jeers were the norm and by and by we got quite used to them. It was all innocent fun, but we were mortally scared to look back or respond in any way. During our day the moral standards were high, there was no mass media or TV or Videos which sometimes can lead children astray and sexual abuse was unheard of, since children were well protected. Illegitimate pregnancies were scary, there was no birth control or abortions. Our teachers were pretty strict and everyone was really geared towards books and examinations. School fees were also high so no one tried to play the fool and we all studied seriously since the goal was to enter the University.

I studied at Ananda College for about 8 years. There was no system of school buses or public transport, so we traveled daily to school by car. Some days when the car was not available, we had to go in the Buggy Cart, which we hated because the boys had a field day ragging us over our ancient mode of transport! They also used to tell us quite threateningly that we had to go and cheer them when they were playing cricket matches. Being quite used to our cricket mad brother at home we did not mind this and I remember my sister and I going to see the matches wearing gold coloured blouses and maroon coloured skirts, those being the colours of Ananda College.

I offered Science subjects for the London Matriculation and the S.S.C. (Senior School Certificate) examinations and proceeded to the University Entrance and First MBBS examinations as a Medical student. I still remember the "Parker 51" pen which my elder brother gifted to me for passing the London Matriculation, with my name "Kusuma Goonewardene" inscribed on it. Our favourite teachers were Mr. Munasinghe who taught Chemistry, Mr. Panikkar, an Indian gentleman who taught Biology, and Mr. Ondaatji and Mr. Gunasena who taught us Physics.

Since the University Entrance Examination was quite a bottle neck, as there was only the University of Colombo at that time which could accommodate only a limited number of students, we studied really hard, sometimes working till the early hours of the morning. At the start I found it very difficult to cope with the dissections. We had to dissect many animals such as

frogs, earthworms, snails, cockroaches and rats, which the Lab Assistant, Seemon, had "gassed" to death. It was quite traumatic to see the heart beat of the frog once we had opened up the body cavity. But we were helpless to make any protest, since this was totally compulsory for the study of medicine. I remember doing the "practicals" for the First MBBS Exam, which were held at the Colombo University, after the theory papers were over. I was struggling to fix the "Wheatston Bridge" a large and unfamiliar instrument, and Professor Mylvaganam came up and very kindly helped me to connect the electrical circuits. I also remember that I was delighted when I found all the four radicals and the titration was perfect at the Chemistry practicals. Thus I passed both the theory and practical examinations, but my fate being what it is, I failed to pass the oral examination, the "Viva", which was certainly a turning point in my life.

Of course I was heartbroken that all my hard work had been in vain. My dream of becoming a doctor and looking after patients was dashed. Thus my education came to a standstill since I did not know which way to proceed, because at that time there was only limited scope for various other fields, which today's students are blessed with. Later it came to my knowledge that the Interview Board, consisting among others, Sir Ivor Jennings and Dr. Nicholas Attygalle, had considered my Matriculation and S.S.C. exam results, where I had obtained a Distinction pass in Sinhalese as well as a pass in Pali, and had decided that my true aptitude was for languages, and I should be encouraged to proceed in that line and leave the study of Medicine to the boys

of Ananda College. However, many of my other colleagues went on to become Doctors and I still have close contacts with some of them such as Dr. Indrani Kulatunge, who is married to my friend Sonny Kulatunge. As a matter of fact, she and her son, Dr. Aruna Kulatunge and his wife, who are also doctors, belong to the team of my beloved doctors who constantly attend to all my medical needs, absolutely free of charge!

So I left Ananda College with a heavy heart, which was made somewhat lighter because Mr. L.H. Mettananda, the Principal, gave me a perfect "Leaving Certificate" which in addition to everything else, said that I was of "excellent character". This was very valuable at that time since it was a document which was considered for obtaining any future employment or entering a profession.

My indomitable spirit, which would not take any defeat, then began to think of how I could proceed with my aspirations for the future. As at that time we were also financially not too stable due to various reasons, and also because a good part of my father's salary went towards improving the cultivations in our estate, I decided that I would find a job. So after looking around for sometime, I found a temporary job as a teacher at the Primary School of Royal College in Colombo.

3

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Teaching the little children at the Royal Primary was a lot of fun and relaxation for me since they responded so well to my teaching. I remember they tried very hard to please me so that they could get praised in front of the class. I also remember one incident at school when during the interval the Head Mistress, Mrs. Lecamwasam, called me and said,

"Kusuma, just look at that!"

I looked at what she was pointing and I saw that some kids were fighting over the Matslide in the play area. At that time there were different language streams for the various ethnic groups, the Sinhalese studied in the Sinhalese language while the Tamil and Muslim children had the Tamil Stream. The Burghers were in the English Stream, thus each was segregated according to their mother tongue. So as we watched them we noticed that if a Sinhalese child got onto to the Matslide, he would allow only his Sinhalese friends on it and if a Tamil child got to it, then it became Tamil only, likewise the Burghers! So they were scuffling and pushing each other, shouting,

"You are Tamil, so don't come here"

"You are Sinhalese, we don't want you here"

"You are Burghers, go away"

And more to this effect. Then Mrs. Lecamwasam told me,

"Kusuma, I shudder to think what will happen when these children grow up. In my day we never had such differences because all the children studied in the English Medium and we never bothered about who is Sinhalese, who is Tamil or who is Burgher".

This incident created a deep impression on me and later in life I remembered her prophetic words, when Sri Lanka was gripped in such an ethnic dissension for over thirty years, creating havoc and great loss of life to all ethnic groups.

After teaching for a while at the Royal Primary, both my younger sister and I managed to gain admission to the Teachers' Training College at Maharagama, a suburb of Colombo. Luckily for us, our knowledge of science was so good thanks to our studies at Ananda College, that we hardly had anything to study, except Teaching Methods. So after having successfully completed the training course, I was again lucky enough to get my first permanent teaching appointment to my own first Alma Mater, Ananda Balika Vidyalaya in Maligakanda, Colombo.

I still feel a sense of achievement because I was able to start the first Science Laboratory at Ananda Balika, where I started my own studies at the primary level. Science as a subject was not taught in the school before, so I had to procure all the necessary Lab equipment, chemicals, posters depicting various aspects of scientific studies, etc. to set up the lab in a separate designated area in the school. Many visual aids were drawn up by a very talented student named Lena de Silva, who later became a famous actress. Our Lab was decorated with pictures of the Darwinian Theory of Evolution, Prehistoric Animals and various Body Organs. All the students came up to the Lab for their lessons and to carry out simple scientific experiments and demonstrations.

One of the greatest events during my teaching career was the organizing of the first ever "Science Exhibition" at Ananda Balika. Hundreds of children and adults from various parts of the country visited it and were quite amazed at the display of scientific data and experiments, and natural phenomena such as a

miniature "Volcanic Eruption", which was never visualized before by most people, TV being unheard of at that time!. At this point I remember with grateful thanks, J.K.P. Ariyaratne, who later became the Professor of Chemistry and Head of Department at the University of Kelaniya, who helped me in every way to set up this Exhibition. He was a pupil of Asoka Devendra at Mahinda College, Galle and it was his untiring efforts that made this event such a success.

A few years ago, shortly before his death, Prof. J.K.P. (as he was affectionately called by all his friends), telephoned me. We had a long chat and remembered the exhibition and all the work done by us to make it a success, in the midst of which he said jokingly,

"Ven. *Bhikkhuni*, you were so pretty then. I was quite jealous of Mr. Devendra and wondered how he managed to get such a lovely wife!"

I laughed and said,

"Thank you very much for the kind compliment. It is nice to hear such things in my old age!"

It is indeed a privilege to have had such a genuine friend and I wish him the supreme bliss of Nibbana.

4

MARRIAGE

My marriage was a formal proposal made by my parents and my elder sister, Sudharma, who was residing in Galle at that time. I was teaching at Ananda Balika Vidyalaya and my proposed husband, Asoka Devendra was also teaching at Mahinda College, Galle. He had completed his BSc. Degree in mathematics at the University of Ceylon and was studying for his Diploma in Education at the University of Colombo, while teaching.

I remember the wedding, which was held at my home in Kolonnawa, and the celebrations lasted almost three days! The entire staff of my school, Ananda Balika, attended the wedding, which was a conducted with all the rites and rituals such as the *"Poruwa Ceremony"*, *"Jayamangala Gatha"*, (Buddhist stanzas chanted to bless a newly married couple) etc. Since Asoka was not in favour of a veil, I did not wear one, and my saree was white with heavy gold work all over it and I carried a bouquet of white May Queen roses with gold tinted leaves. The gift given by my staff mates , which was an imported china dinner set consisting of 100 pieces is still well preserved in the original condition, despite being constantly used, and my daughter is keeping it as a souvenir and heirloom to be seen by the next generation!

5

LIFE AT MAHARAGAMA AND MAHAMEGHA GARDENS

After marriage we stayed with my parents at Kolonnawa and Asoka had got a transfer to Ananda College, Colombo. Unfortunately at this point, a big problem arose in my family. My parents, two sisters and my elder brother took offence because my younger brother had fallen in love with my husband's younger sister, Kamala. My family strongly opposed this because they wanted my younger brother to go to England to do his higher studies and become a professional. I suppose they also wanted

him to get married to a very rich girl, whereas my sister-in-law was not so rich and influential. Anyway, they accused me of supporting this alliance, which was not true because I was not aware of it myself until then. They got even more angry because I questioned why if it was good enough for me to get married from that family then why it was not suitable for my brother to do so. Anyway amidst all this opposition, they got married and only I attended the wedding from our side of the family, and my brother and I were excommunicated for nearly five years, during which period I never saw any one of my family other than my younger brother. With such a rift happening, we found it impossible to stay at my parent's place any longer and so Asoka and I decided to move out to a place of our own as soon as possible.

Then luckily for us, Asoka was appointed as Lecturer in Mathematics at the Teacher's Training College at Maharagama, a suburb of Colombo, and I managed to get the post of Science Teacher at the adjoining "Practising School" where the Teacher Trainees did their practical teaching as a part of their Training Course. So we moved out of Kolonnawa and rented out a house at Maharagama, where we started anew, and had six children including a pair of twins, named, Peshala, Hemabha, Aruni, Lasitha, Meth and Mudith, within just seven years.

I must admit that it was quite a hard task to manage six children and do a full time job, even though we did have a couple of servants to help. I remember complaining to Mrs. Sugathadasa, the wife of the Principal of the Teacher's Training College that all I needed

was just one good night's sleep! For almost seven years, it was a case of breaking rest with the babies and rushing off to school before the bell the next morning. However, my career of teaching science which lasted over 12 years was most fulfilling because my students were excellent and out of the 40 children who sat for the Ordinary Level examination in the science subjects, at least 38 would pass, some with distinctions.

After living in our rented house for some years, our next goal was to build our own home. With this objective, we hunted around for a suitable place and then found a nice block of land at Mahamegha Gardens, Maharagama, which was a very convenient and comfortable location. Then came the task of building our house which was also not a mean task!

A group of skilled masons and carpenters arrived from Kandy, made a little hut in a corner of the land and embarked upon the construction work. The house was quite spacious, having four rooms downstairs with attached toilettes and a separate two roomed annex upstairs, which was also complete with a hall, Kitchen and toilette, which could be used as a separate unit. During this time Asoka was also working for the UNESCO in addition to his full time job as a Lecturer in Mathematics, and this entailed frequent visits abroad for him. This meant that house building had to be supervised by me most of the time. After I returned home from school, most days I used to visit the worksite and the workmen really appreciated my visits because it was my habit to make sandwiches out of 2-3 loaves of bread with either

tinned fish or "*Seeni Sambol*" (spicy fried onions), etc. and take it for their "tea". So they all enjoyed the snack and drank their tea and much refreshed, they used to work till late at night, which ensured the very rapid completion of the construction work.

Once the house was completed, we moved in. It was quite a new neighbourhood and we managed to blend in very well and become good friends with all our neighbours. The children had plenty of playmates and we also used to have visitors dropping in all the time so that life was full of friends and activity.

My younger brother Somachandra and his wife Kamala, and Asoka's other two sisters, Ranjani and Sarojini, along with their husbands and children, used to be frequent visitors to our place. When they all arrived, the whole house was turned nearly upside down, and the noise levels were truly unbelievable, with singing, dancing and eating till late at night. The next morning our next door neighbours, Mr. Walter Silva and Mr. Joe Perera would laughingly remark,

"Ha! So last night all the Aunts and Uncles came eh? We could just tell from the noise level!"

It was so nice to have such tolerant and friendly neighbours and we still share the same feelings of friendship, respect and regard when we meet each other even now.

At home we had quite a large garden with many trees, which were bearing fruit most of the time. Our Jak Tree which was pretty abundant, produced so much of Jak fruit that it was far too much even for our big household! So I used to employ a man to pluck

the mature Jak fruits, cut them into pieces and distribute it to all our neighbours.

During the Sinhalese and Tamil New Year, (A harvest festival, which is an integral part of our culture) which is held during the month of April, during school holidays, life became pretty hectic. New clothes to be sewn for everyone, to be worn on the auspicious day, sweetmeats to be prepared, visitors to be entertained, and plates of "goodies" to be exchanged among all the neighbours. I remember I used to prepare about 200-300 pieces of "*Mung Kavum*" (A kind of deep fried cookie made out of Mung Bean flour and rice flour) which lasted through the whole New Year period. Sometime when our two Avocado Pear trees had an excess of fruit, I used to send Avocado fruits in exchange for the plates of sweetmeats sent by neighbours. The partaking of the first meal for the new year is a ritual usually shared by someone near and dear. I remember it was my dear friend and colleague at the Sri Jayawardenepura University, Oranee Jansz, and her husband Prof. Jansz and their three children who used to share this meal with us. It was such a pleasure to have them and we shared all the good times with them. Even now, the same feeling of closeness and friendship prevails, though the rituals are no longer observed.

The "Mahamegha Gardens Welfare Society" of which Asoka was the President for many years, held a "Sinhalese and Tamil New Year" celebration every year, where all the neighbours gathered in the playground nearby to hold many competitions such as races, relays, cricket matches, beauty contests, pillow fights, bun eating competitions, etc. Asoka and I were invited as Chief Guests to

distribute the prizes for the winners of the contests, followed by music, food and drink. The whole housing complex was like one family, as it was a new residential area, with people coming from various different places settling down here after building their homes.

Another night to remember was December 31st, which we invariably shared with our much loved relations, Oswald and Seeli Dewendre and their three children, who were very close to our hearts. It was a night of a lot of fun and laughter, spent at the Galle Face Green, where we partied until the dawn of the New Year, with plenty of food, drink and a lovely fireworks display at midnight. We were heartbroken when O.T. (as Oswald was usually called) passed away. Seeli too passed away recently and I hope that they will achieve the true bliss of Nibbana. Seeli was such generous lady, whose delicious home made Ice Cream in three large bowls whenever we went to dine at their place, (which was very often), is still remembered and talked about by us often and their children too still have a special place in my heart, even though we do not meet so often now.

Some other close friends who usually joined our functions were Hubert and Serginia De Silva and their two sons and Lenin and Latha Jayasinghe with their two sons. In addition to giving special Danas and having evening *Poojas* at the Temple, the children's Birthdays were usually celebrated with a small "Party" at home for friends and relations. Since there was no outside "catering" those days, all the party fare, cakes, pastries, sandwiches, cutlets,

cream buns, etc. were made at home by me. Of course when my daughters grew up things got better because they too helped in the cooking and baking. In addition, it was also my responsibility to make 3 – 4 pounds of cake and send it off to their schools to be shared by their class mates and teachers.

Another notable and unforgettable friend was Malathi Wickramaratne. She was such a lovely person, as were her two children, Nalin and Ramani. I remember when my two elder children were down with Hepatitis, she prepared a special medicinal congee with some secret ingredients, and sent it through her son, Nalin, every morning to our place at the crack of dawn, all the way to Maharagama from Battaramulla, before he went to school at Royal College in Colombo. So my children recovered very fast from their illness. Malathi and Nalin have both passed away now and I wish that they will share in all the Merit I make and achieve the bliss of Nibbana.

On the 4th of every month, we used to give two regular Danas, one to the Mahamegaramaya, which is our "Village Temple", headed by Ven. Ankumbure Sugunawansha Thero and the other to the Indraramaya Temple at Pannipitiya, headed by Ven. Hedigama Indrajothi Thero. Both these monks were very erudite and pious. Our "*Loku Hamuduruwo*" (Chief Priest), Sugunawansha Thero would stop if I met him on the road and say,

"*Nonamahattaya,* (Lady), you send such a good *Dana,* I never go anywhere on the 4th of the month or accept any other invitations on that day!"

He would also tell people that,

"If Mrs. Devendra is the first person you meet when you embark on a journey, then that journey is going to be a success!"

Indrajothi Thero was a scholar from whom I learnt Buddhism and Pali. They were both such wonderful monks, whom I think of with much worshipful respect.

It was the habit of our entire household to observe "*Sil*" (eight Precepts) and spend the whole day at the Mahamegaramaya Temple on every Wesak Full Moon Poya Day. Since both breakfast and lunch are served at the temple for the devotees, even our servants and helpers all joined us on this day at the Temple, where there was a full days' programme of Observing the Precepts, Chanting, Dhamma Discussions, etc., conducted by Monks and lay preachers. In the evening we used to rush home to light up the Wesak lanterns and decorate the house in celebration of the Birth of Lord Buddha. There was a general competition in the neighbourhood as to which household had the most beautiful lanterns and decorations, and I remember usually our house managed to get the first place. Once we had such a beautiful lantern, made with the help of my sister-in-law, Ranjini's husband, Ratnasena, who was very skilled at making them, a foreigner who was passing by, stopped at our place, photographed the lantern and asked whether he could crate it and take it back to his country. We told him that since it was made out of thin strips of Bamboo, it would not last for long, and he then gave up the idea!

As I mentioned before, Asoka was lecturing at the Teacher's Training College during this time and every year after their annual Sports Meet, 100-200 teacher trainees would invade our house in a body, singing and dancing. This was an age old tradition. We could hear them when they were about one mile away and the whole of the neighbourhood too were quite used to the invasion. Their favourite chant was "*Apata Kanna Diyalla, apata bonna diyalla, api gedera yanne nene, kukula handanakan*" (Give us to eat, give us to drink, we will not go home until the cock crows!). So we used to prepare a huge tubful of cool drink, made out of fresh fruit, sugar, water and some citric acid, with a couple of large slabs of ice chopped up, along with a mountain of sandwiches and cutlets, which they all relished, after their long tiring day at the sports meet. Then they would demand that Asoka and I should sing a song and we had to sing because they would not leave until we did so! I remember we had to wash and mop the whole house after they left, but the memories are still cherished both by us and the students whom we sometimes meet and they never fail to remember these things and say,

"We are what we are today, thanks to our teachers!"

And then there were the trips and the pilgrimages. Every school holiday meant a trip, either to a religious or a cultural site, such as Kataragama, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Dambulla, etc. My brother Somachandra, who was very wealthy and generous, used to organize the transport, usually a bus, and accommodation for all of us. Most of the time the trips consisted of 4-5 families both relations and friends as well as servants. It was such fun to

plan and organize the trips and we used have long discussions on what to make for each meal (since there were hardly any "eating places" en route) and the quantities. I remember breakfast was always prepared at our place to be packed and taken away, since the bus started off very early from our home. So I remember making stringhoppers (steamed circles of strands of rice flour – a favorite Sri Lankan breakfast food), dhal curry, coconut sambal, fish curry, etc. which we ate at a wayside school or a temple. Lunch was cooked on the way, since we took all the cooking utensils, dry provisions, condiments, etc., and the servants were available to help out with the work. It was a case of never ending singing, joking, eating and drinking and the children having a wonderful time. Each household also brought their favourite snacks and sweets, milk toffees, coconut fudge, cakes and cookies, jars full, so that everyone could be as greedy as they liked, without any restrictions! I remember the large bunch of ripe bananas supplied by my brother, hanging from the overhead bar of the bus, much appreciated by everyone, specially the younger ones who for once, had their fill of bananas!

In 1981, when my younger daughter was seriously ill, we wanted to give special *Dana* to the devotees at Kataragama. So as usual we went to Kataragama and took all the provisions, rice, coconuts, vegetables, etc enough to feed 500 people. We employed the cooks at the Pilgrim's Rest to do the cooking for us and made 500 packets of rice and curry which my daughter distributed to the devotees with her own hands. It was a wonderful experience, which gave my daughter much happiness, in spite of her illness.

Another unforgettable trip we made was to Jaffna. Just before all the troubles started in the North, my brother, Somachandra, was working as the Examiner of Motor Vehicles in the Jaffna peninsular. So as usual during a school vacation, we went to Jaffna by the night mail train, since Asoka had First Class Railway Warrants. When we reached Jaffna by the next morning, we felt as if we were in a different country, the environment, vegetation and the scenery were so different! My brother hired a big van and took us all over Jaffna. We went to Kankesanthurai, Point Pedro, Kayts, Keerimalai hot water wells, and similar places. We went by boat to Nagadipa and the children were amazed to see hundreds of wild ponies running about in Delft. The Kovil festivals we went to, were spectacular! The music played by the Indian musicians, specially brought down for the festivals, was heavenly! I remember we were so impressed by the huge lamp and the massive "*Vel*" Carts used to transport the huge statues of the Gods at the *Vel* Processions, at the famous Nallur Temple, where only the men were allowed to go inside, after removing their shirts. The "*Falooda*" Sherbets at the Subash hotel are still remembered by the children! And the people of Jaffna are the most unforgettable of all. Extremely friendly and so generous, they used to invite us frequently to their homes and feed us with lovely *Thosai, Masala* Vadai and other special Jaffna delicacies. So it was with real heartfelt sorrow and regret that I witnessed the terrible loss of life and all the mayhem and destruction caused by a few maniacs for such a long period, in the once beautiful Jaffna where we, the Sinhalese, were treated with so much love and generosity by the Tamil people.

My younger brother, Somachandra, who was close to my heart, started life at the Maha Illupallama Farm Tractor Station. During that time the mechanization of agriculture in the country was just starting and even though my father had offered to send him to England for higher studies, he refused to go and started work at my father's estate and introduced machinery to the farming process. I remember the wonder and amazement of the workers there, when my brother first started ploughing and threshing the paddy with tractors. So the water buffaloes got a well deserved holiday! I remember how my brother innovated upswept fenders on the tractors so that the straw did not catch fire because of the exhaust fumes. My brother's one ambition was to become a "*Govi Raja*" (a Farmer King), but alas, he had to give up my father's property because the family objected to his marriage and both of us were disinherited and ostracized by the family. However, being a very talented and intelligent man, he had no lack of job offers and he immediately joined the Maha Illuppalama Government Farm, and went on from there to become a very rich man.

Unlike most rich men, my brother was extremely generous and large hearted and his wife being Asoka's sister, our families were as one and we benefited the most from their wealth. He was my children's most beloved "*Punchi Mama*" ("Small Uncle"), and he and Asoka's sister, Kamala, made sure that we had a wonderful time when we visited them during most of the school holidays. It was always a party time with exotic food and drink, dancing and music, whenever we got together. Being Government servants with limited incomes, Asoka and I could not afford to give the

children many luxuries, but their uncle and aunt used to take all of us out for meals at big hotels, visits to the Cinema and various other types of entertainment! They had three children and while they were living in Kandy, my brother died young, at only 55 years. We were all devastated by his passing away, and the children cried for days. We still miss him and talk of him and I always remember him in my prayers and wish him the bliss of *Nibbana*.

Asoka's younger brother, Leo Devendra, was a teacher and was teaching at the Dharmaraja College in Kandy. His favourite pastime was to bring batches of his students on excursions to Colombo to visit the Zoo, the Museum, Planetarium, Colombo Port and such other places of interest. Invariably, board and lodging for a whole van load of young boys and my brother-in-law was supplied by us. Our upstairs flat was commandeered and the kitchen had to be in operation at all odd hours of the day to feed hungry and tired mouths! I remember once they turned up late at night. I had made the rice flour batter with coconut milk to be used the next morning to make hoppers (a kind of crispy pancake) for the household. But I had to feed the unexpected visitors so I made them hot, hot fresh hoppers and fish curry late at night, which was appreciated so much! About one year ago, Leo passed away and I was so amazed when I attended his funeral, because some of those young students who had visited our home so long ago, now all grown up and holding high posts, came running, worshipped me and started recalling how as "Devendra Aunty" those days, I had hosted them and treated them kindly, when they had visited Colombo!

1971 was a year of acute food shortage and hardship. During this time, poor street children came to our gate in large numbers, begging for food. They were real urchins, dirty and unkempt, mostly covered with festering sores and itching. As a mother, I found this to be intolerable. So my daily task was to give them some soap and old towels and get them to have a good bath at the garden tap. Then I supplied them with some old clothes which my sons had outgrown, and before giving them some food I used to treat all their wounds with some antiseptic lotion and antibiotic cream. Of course, I could afford to give them only some plain rice with one curry most of the time because we too were feeling the pinch of those days. But it gladdened my heart to see how they were cramming the food into their mouths so ravenously. They used to turn up every second day and underwent the same ritual. Then one day when I needed some help in the household, I asked them whether one of them would like to stay at our house and help with the work for a few days. One boy said "Yes" at once.

So I said,

"In that case you must bring your father and come. Then I will keep you"

The very next day he turned up with an old man in rags, like a beggar. When I spoke to the father, I was very surprised to discover that he had actually worked under my father at the Government Factory, but since his retirement, he had come upon very hard times and was now almost reduced to begging. So I told him,

"Don't worry, I will look after your son, and teach him to read and write and treat him well"

The old man was so happy that he departed with tears in his eyes. So I took over the boy, who was named Vasantha, immediately bathed him, sent him to the nearby barbershop for a haircut, got him some new clothes and he turned out to be such a good little worker. I used to pay him, I think, about 50/= rupees a month, and sometimes his father used to come and get some money from him. I also taught him some basic letters and he was able to learn to read and write little by little. Anyway, he stayed with us for nearly six years until he was quite grown up, and when his father died, he had to leave us to look after his ailing mother. So we said good bye very sadly. After about 10 years, I was at the bus stand waiting for a bus to go home from the Sri Jayawardenepura University, when a young man came up to me and started talking very respectfully. It was with great joy that I recognized our Vasantha, who was now doing quite well in life being a skilled mason, undertaking building contracts all over the country.

Another incident I remember vividly is about the two beggar women who also used to come to our gate begging very often. Once, one woman said that she had torn her one and only cloth and begged me to give her another old cloth to wear. Since I did not have anything suitable, I tore one of my sarees into two and gave her one piece, since a saree is about 6 yards long, and she wanted only a cloth to drape herself in the typical Sinhala

style. A few days later, the other beggar woman also turned up asking for something to wear. So I gave her the balance piece of the saree, and forgot all about it. A few months later, the second beggar woman came to see me and told me that the other woman had died on the road and the corpse was wrapped in my saree for burial because that was the only "good" cloth she had possessed at the time of her death!

Another unforgettable character was Arnolis, who came to join our household and help out in general. He must have been about 14 or 15 years old at that time, extremely industrious, courteous and humble, with a heart of gold. He was a child from a family who worked in my father's estate at Melsiripura and being so poor, the family was happy that he was at our place earning his keep. He looked after my four sons, who were quite small at that time, like his own brothers. When they returned from school tired out, it was *"Anno"*, as he was affectionately called by everyone, who used to remove their clothes, bathe them and even feed them, if they demanded that he did so! When I sent him to escort the boys for their swimming "meet", he came back most disheartened, lamenting that his *"babas"* (children), even though they were the biggest among the competitors, had come last in all their races!

Sometimes during the holidays, we used to go and spend two or three weeks at Asoka's mother's house in Kandy or at my brother's place, leaving Anno behind as the caretaker. Arnolis could also cook and we filled up the fridge with foodstuffs so that he could cook for himself during our absence. However, when we returned

home after this lengthy holiday, we were shocked to find that all the food was untouched! I was quite annoyed that he had not bothered to cook and eat, and almost shouted at him,

"What is the matter, *Anno*, didn't you have any meals? See all this food is still in the fridge! Why did you starve yourself like this?"

Then he would explain most apologetically,

"*Aiyo Nonamahattaya*, (Oh, Lady), I got so much of food from all the neighbours!. When they found that I was alone at home, Mrs. Walter Silva, Mrs. Joe Perera, Mrs. Weerasinghe, Mrs. Thalgodapitiya, Mrs. Gomes and all the others sent me all my meals! I simply did not need to cook at all!"

Such was the respect and regard he commanded even from our neighbours because he was always very respectful towards them too and always volunteered to help them, as and when he could. When we returned home from the holiday, hungry and tired after the long journey, we found that the house was spick and span, floors polished, beds made, clothes washed and ironed and the food cooked!

Anyway Anno was with us for as long as twelve years, and then we decided that we should find him a job so that he could now start on a life of his own. So we managed to get him a job as a peon at the Teachers' Training College, and later on as an Office Assistant in a school close to his home at Melsiripura, where he

was such a trusted and loved employee that he was even entrusted with the task of organizing their sports meets and the New Year Celebrations. Every New Year's day he used to visit us carrying a large load of goodies from the village and when the children saw him coming at a distance they ran and hugged him, shouting,

"*Anno* coming, *Anno* coming!"

Then came tragedy. On one New year's eve, Anno went to visit his fiancée at Trincomalee in the East Coast. This was when the war was at its height, and on his return home, terrorists attacked the bus in which he was traveling at Habarana and all the passengers were shot dead. When we received the telegram informing us that Anno had been killed, our grief knew no bounds. The whole household was in tears, likewise the neighbours. We immediately took off to Melsiripura, 90 miles away. When we approached his village we found the place decorated for miles with white flags and pictures of Anno, the roads strewn with white sand as a mark of respect and the whole village in mourning. When his mother saw us, she came running and cried,

"*Sudu Hamu,* (lady) why did you send my son home? This terrible thing would not have happened if he stayed with you".

The whole village and all the school children attended the massive funeral and we returned home heartbroken with sadness.

Another episode I remember is about a poor family in the neighbourhood. The father had abandoned the family of four

small kids and they were so destitute that the mother used to come and work for us as a "Daily Help" in the house. In addition to paying her salary I used to send enough food for the whole family every day and I remember I bought a "tiffin carrier" specially for this purpose. I also used to supply them with used clothes and books for school too and they managed to live like this for quite a long time. Then one day the father turned up and there was a family reunion. After some time, he came to see me and thanked me profusely for looking after his family and said that now he was working as a pharmacist and would like to send his daughter to Musaeus College, where my own daughters were schooling, and asked whether I could give a letter of recommendation to the Principal, so that he could admit his daughter there. I gladly did so and after that the family prospered, and used to visit us on special occasions. When I think back on these little episodes, I feel that my life had not been lived in vain.

Asoka's younger sister's son was a brilliant student. It was my pleasure every month to give him Rs. 100/= when I got my salary, so that he was able to buy his monthly season ticket for the bus. In those days this was quite a large sum considering the salaries we were paid. Today he is a Professor of Bio Chemistry at a Medical College in the USA and is involved in research into cancer cures. When I visit the U.S.A., and he is informed of my visit, he informs my tour organizers that,

"I don't call her my "Aunt" because she is much more than that to me!"

And he comes vast distances just to see me and speak to me and thank me in gratitude, even though many years have passed since I gave him that little support in appreciation of his efforts at studying.

I also remember one of Asoka's cousins, a lady who came to live in a small annex close to our house. Her husband too had walked out on her leaving her to fend for herself and their four small sons. She was really an extremely hardworking and brave person who did a full time job while looking after the four kids and educating them. It was my daily task to look out for her when she returned home after a hard day's work in the evening, tired and hungry. I used to have a cup of tea and a small bite ready because I knew how hard it was for her to go back home and start her next session of cooking dinner, washing up, seeing to the kids, etc. Recently, she had met my daughter and had told her,

"Pesh, I remember those days of real hardship. Life was such a burden. I had to keep struggling so hard to live and to bring up the kids. But one thing I always think of is the way your mother, Kusuma *Akka*, (elder sister) used to help me to cope with life. Every evening dropping into your place after work was the highlight of my day. As I went into your house not a word was spoken. My tea and snack were on the table. I used to go straight there and gulp down my tea and eat. Only after that Kusuma Akka would speak and ask me how my day had been and give me a small *Dhamma* talk and then I looked forward to going home and attending to my work, which I did quite happily because I was so refreshed and happy after my little 'detour'".

It is indeed with great happiness and pride that I record here that today she has won out in life. Her sons are all doing very well. She has managed to build four houses, one for each child, given them in marriage, and she is still working, on an extension after retirement. She is a happy and proud grandmother, who is reaping the benefits of her arduous task of facing life with courage and fortitude.

During this time, the most erudite scholar monk, Ven. Nyanaponika Maha Thero who was German by birth and the President of the Buddhist Publication Society, lived in a hermitage built in the wilderness of the Udawattakele Sanctuary in Kandy. On the 1st of every month we gave a *Dana* to him, which was generally organized by my mother in law. As soon as I get my salary, the first thing I used to do was to go to the University Sub Post Office and send off a money order to my mother in law, who used to encash it and prepare a special *Dana* for the Ven. Thero. During our visits to Kandy, it was a joy to go and visit this lovely monk and speak to him. I learnt so much *Dhamma* from him and his most wonderful book, "The Heart of Buddhist Meditation" became my handbook to teach and learn *Dhamma* for many years.

My mother-in-law was a Christian by birth, but after some time she converted to become a devout Buddhist and I was happy to help her to learn all the Pali Stanzas for chanting by writing them out for her in the English script. She always appreciated the saree blouses I stitched for her saying that they fitted her better than what the tailors made. Actually her attitude towards me was more

like a mother than the proverbial "mother-in-law" and after my father- in- law passed away, I remember I told her,

"Mother, if ever you have any problems living in Kandy, please remember that our doors are always open for you. You are welcome to come and be with us all the time"

Of course there was no opportunity for her to come to us because she was looked after very well by her children until she passed away at the age of 94 years, but she told me later that she often thought of my invitation and always felt happy that we were there for her, if she needed any kind of help at any time.

Agga Maha Panditha, Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Nayaka Thero, was residing at his Monastry at Moraketiya, which was walking distance from our home. It was such a joy to visit him in the evenings when we were at leisure, accompanied by the children. He kept us enthralled by narrating his experiences with ghosts, divine beings and demons from hell. He told stories of how a "*Bhuta*" (Ghost) would carry away hoppers and how suddenly there would be money under a pillow of a poor widow, whose husband had become a ghost but still supported her to live. When the Ven. Thero fell sick and was unable to partake of his regular *Dana*, he would send me a message and I used to prepare toast, *Katta Sambal* (A chutney made out of dried red chillies, onions, salt and lime juice) and *Rasam Gravy* (a spicy gravy made with tamarind, garlic, ginger and spices), and send them to him until he became well again. I consider it was a great good fortune for us to have had such close contacts with such a wonderful human being.

I remember a story he told us. The Ven. Thero used to visit India very often to meditate at the monastries in the remote hills of the Himalayas. Once someone had told him that there was a "*Rishi*" (a meditating Yogi) who had lived for about 300 years and could do "magic", and who was living in a cave at Rishikesh on a mountain peak. During his young days the Ven. Thero was quite fond of such adventures and he was determined to go and visit this Rishi. So he enlisted the help of a couple of Sherpas (guides) and also some donkeys to carry things and to ride on, because the journey up the steep, snow covered peaks would be very hard and set off on his journey. After a long and exhausting trip they at last reached the cave of the *Rishi*, full of anticipation. But their hopes were dashed because the cave was empty. So, full of disappointment, they pitched their tents to stay the night and leave home the next morning. Then suddenly, in the growing dusk, they saw that the cave was enveloped in a thick mist and as they watched, the mist congealed and poured into the cave! The next moment to their amazement, they saw the ancient *Rishi*, his body sack-like and shapeless, sitting inside the cave cross legged and in deep meditation! They first thought they were hallucinating, but then realized that actually the *Rishi* was there. However, Ven. Thero told us that it was not possible to communicate with the *Rishi* so they were content to just look at him and come away satisfied. So we asked Ven. Ananda Maitreya as to how it could possibly happen that way and he said,

"Well, I cannot give an entirely truthful answer to that because I myself do not know how it was done. But I can make a guess. I think that the *Rishi*, through his very advanced *Jhanic* Meditational powers, could change the solid element (*Patavi Dhathu*) of his body into an air element (*Vayo Dhathu*), so that he could do astral traveling to far away remote areas and then change the body elements back again, when he got back home. This is the only explanation I can think of."

Maybe this story would supply a good foundation for anyone who wants to investigate how Lord Buddha visited Sri Lanka on several occasions, as mentioned in our historical chronicles. After all, Lord Buddha did possess great supra normal powers, far beyond any other being in the universe.

During this time there was another revered and welcome visitor to our home. This was Ven. Baduraliye Chandima Thero. He was a forest dwelling monk, who was meditating in the jungles at *Siripada* (the sacred peak where Lord Budda's footprint is supposed to be embedded) for over 40 years. On his very rare visits to Colombo, he did not fail to come and see us and we were all very happy to see him and speak to him because, the *Dhamma* that he preached was so deep but so different as he hardly had any textual knowledge, but purely explained his experiences through meditation. I was amazed to discover that he had experienced, first hand, all the mind states that are described in the Buddhist texts. Finally he had decided that he had to give the world the knowledge that he had accumulated, and he got someone to give

him the 7 Books of the *Abhidhamma Pitaka,* and in no time he mastered all the texts, and afterwards used to preach *Dhamma* at the Maharagama Dharmayathana Temple, during his "*Vas*" Period. (Rains Retreat Period). I used to attend all his discourses and took copious notes, which helped me a lot in my later studies. I still have about 15 exercise books filled with notes on his teachings.

When he visited our place, we had to make special meals for him because he could not eat any spices, nor salt or pepper. We had to just boil vegetables and make salads without any dressing, because he was only used to eating raw leaves and yams and fruits in the jungle. It was only after a long time that he got used to a bit of spices and salt in his rice and curries! His nose was half eaten away by a bear, and when my children questioned him as to how it happened he laughed and said,

"Ah, that happened when I went to the jungle for the first time. At that time I had not developed my *Metta* (Loving Kindness) Meditation and so the bear attacked me. But thereafter I really concentrated on *Metta* Meditation and never again did any animal become hostile towards me all the time I was in the jungle!"

Listening to this I thought that *Metta* Meditation must be like a shield that protects you from harm. The one who practices it properly will never face any danger.

My children used to ask him,

"Are there Divine Beings or Gods?"

He used to reply,

"Oh yes! Of course."

Then my eldest son would ask him,

"In that case Ven. Sir, when we offer trays of fruit and sweetmeats to the Gods at the *Devale* (Shrines dedicated to different gods), do they eat them? What is the purpose of such offerings? Can the Gods really help us?"

Then the Ven. Monk would answer,

"*Podi Mahattaya*, (young Sir,) supposing you need to ask for a favour from a Government Minister or a Head of an Institution. How would you set about it? Do you just barge into their office or home, and demand that the favour be done? Do you think you would be successful? Instead, if you first make an appointment with the big man, then get some curd and treacle, a comb of Bananas and maybe a nice cake as presents, and then go and first give the gifts and then quietly ask for the favour. Don't you think the second method would be more fruitful?"

My son would laugh and say,

"Definitely, Ven. Sir, the second method would be much better!"

Then the erudite Monk would say,

"Ah, now you understand why people offer things to the Gods when they need help or relief. Gods are *putajjanas* (mundane beings), although they have supra normal powers because of all the good *Karma* they have done in their earlier births. So they are pleased when people take all the trouble to come to their shrines, carrying offerings, and being pleased, they will try to help with whatever problem the human beings are afflicted with because they can certainly help with mundane problems as they have supra normal powers. Of course this is not the way to *Nibbana*, but to exist in the world, you need some support and the gods are always willing to help good people"

Such was the way in which he would explain complicated matters. He would not accept any money or gifts, but once when my daughter insisted on giving him something, then he said he would accept a bottle of Marmite because he could spread it on jungle leaves and eat them!

My children would ask him how he could stay in the jungle all alone in the dark of the night. Then the Ven. Monk would explain that he would meditate on a tiny dot of light and then enlarge it by making it in to an "*Aloka Kasina*" (a light object) which he says is bright enough to light up the whole area. Such were his powers and we were really sad when he passed away some years later.

When thinking of Kalyana Mittas, (True friends), Mr. B.R. de Silva, his wife, Shrimathi and their three children, Nihal, Jayantha and Sriyanthi, also spring to my mind. They lived opposite the Sri Jayewardenepura University and I used to drop in daily at their

place on my way to work. Mr. B.R. de Silva was a well known Chartered Accountant heading his own Accountancy firm and his wife was the daughter of Mr. Arthur V. Dias of Panadura, who was popularly referred to as "*Kos Mama*" (Jackfruit Uncle) because he was a pioneer in planting Jackfruit trees to aid the economy of the country in times of hardship. Mr. B.R. de Silva was an avid student of Abhidhamma, and we used to have many discussions while I enjoyed their most generous hospitality. They were very generous, educated and faithful friends and our friendship has endured through the years. Though Mr. and Mrs. B.R. de Silva and their younger son have passed away, their eldest son Nihal, who is carrying on the father's firm, never fails to invite me and Asoka for their annual *Dhamma* programmes in memory of his parents and brother, and it is always in my mind that our beloved friends who passed away must be looking after us from their heavenly abodes and sharing in the merit that we make in their memory.

It was Mr. B.R. de Silva who introduced us to Mr. Buddhadasa and Mrs. Peiris, who were conducting Abhidhamma classes at their home in Nugegoda. Every Saturday Asoka and I attended these classes without fail, for about five years. This knowledge of Abhidhamma was invaluable to us when we did *Vipassana* Meditation and gave talks on *Dhamma*, later in life.

Another thing I was fascinated with during this time was Meditation. I took several Meditation Retreats at the Kanduboda Vipassana Meditation Centre, and Asoka and all my children too, did the same. It made such a big difference in our lives.

I am so indebted to Mr. Dharmasena Ariyatilleke, who later ordained as Ven . Harispattuwe Ariyawansalankara Thero, for almost forcing me to go to Kanduboda for Meditation, at the start. Mr. Ariyatilleke who was a lay Buddhist Preacher at that time, used to stay at our home whenever he used to conduct one-day Meditation retreats at the Mahamegharamaya Temple or the Teacher's Training College. It was he who insisted,

"Kusuma *Akka* (elder Sister), you must go for Meditation. I will personally take you to the Kanduboda Meditation Centre and introduce you to the Chief Monk"

So at long last I decided to visit Kanduboda. When we reached there, the Chief Monk, Ven. Kahatapitiye Sumathipala Thero, looked at me for a long moment and asked,

"What do you do?"

Then the senior Nun at Kanduboda, Ven. Shanthilatha Meniyo, who accompanied me to him said,

"She is a teacher"

Immediately the Ven. Thero responded saying,

"Oh no. I know these teachers! They are used to working at hundred miles per hour! They do not have the patience to keep '*Sati*'(Mindfulness). And they can't do meditation!"

I was dreadfully disappointed. Seeing my face, Ven. Shanthilatha Meniyo intervened again and said,

"No, Ven. Sir, she is not just a school teacher. She is actually a lecturer at the University!"

Somehow, this seemed to be alright and so the Ven. Monk kindly agreed to let me stay for the meditation retreat.

At the start I was full of confidence and thought that I was quite clever and could do Meditation very easily! But the Ven. Monk was so right! I couldn't do any Meditation! My mind was running about so much that I could not concentrate on anything for even one minute! But I was not going to give up that easily and kept on trying very hard. But after five days, I broke out in a cold sweat in the middle of the night, trembling and shivering. I immediately called out to Ven. Shanthilatha *Meniyo*, who came and gave me some hot milk to drink and some biscuits to eat and calmed me down. She told me kindly,

"Are you upset because you are thinking of your husband and the children? Don't worry, everything is fine, I am sure. Please go to sleep now peacefully"

And she kept on stroking my head until I fell asleep. The next morning I was so sound asleep that I did not hear the wake up bell at 3:00 a.m.! When I finally awoke, it was even past breakfast time and I saw that someone had kindly placed my breakfast at my bedside! I felt so embarrassed that I informed the Chief Nun and the Ven. Monk that I would like to go home and return on a later date, to which they consented, with great compassion towards me. So I returned home after my first effort at Meditation, with a lot of memories.

Then Asoka wanted to try out a retreat and he too went off to Kanduboda. He was able to concentrate very well, (I wonder whether being a Mathematician had anything to do with it?) and returned after two weeks after completing the course successfully. I felt sad that I was unable to do so, but consoled myself by promising to try it again soon.

The second time I went to Kanduboda too, I did not have much success with Meditation, but I managed to stay five days without any kind of disturbance or difficulty. A few months after this, my elder daughter wanted to go and meditate at Kanduboda. So I decided to accompany her there. The Ven. Chief Monk took one look at us and said,

"The general rule here is that no two persons from the same family can come and Meditate at the same time, because invariably they will disturb each other by talking and communicating. But I think I can trust both of you not to do so. So I will break the rule this time and allow both of you to stay!"

We stayed for eight days that time and I felt comfortable and calm when I saw my daughter Meditating peacefully. But I took things easy and thinking that I will never have any success in Meditation, I relaxed totally, eating, sleeping, bathing, washing clothes and only once in a way sitting down to Meditate rather casually. On the seventh day, without even being aware, I had sat in Meditation for a long time, without feeling sleepy or tired as usual, and I realized that my mind was becoming very focused and I could concentrate deeply. The next day I informed Ven. Sumathipala Thero of my experience. Then he asked me,

"What was your first thought when you came out of the Meditation?"

"Ven. Sir, I thought that I had had experienced **Paticca Samuppada** (Dependent Origination/Causality) while I had no conscious thoughts, feelings or body consciousness due to my total concentration"

The Ven. Monk was very happy. He blessed me by chanting the following stanza from the *Ratana Sutta,*

"**Sahavassa dassana sampadaya... .....**"

In the end, he asked me,

"Do you know the meaning of "**cha cā bhi thānāni**'?"

I said,

"No, Ven. Sir"

He replied that it referred to the "Six Heinous Crimes", being the Killing of Mother, Killing of Father, Killing of an Arahant, Drawing Blood from the Body of a Buddha, Creating Dissention among the Sangha and Holding a Pernicious View. In other words, the Ven. Monk was telling me that hereafter I would never be capable of committing the Six heinous crimes. I think it was the most joyful moment of my life!
Then he smiled and said,

"You have done enough Meditation. Now go home and do your duties and live a peaceful lay life with your family!"

My children too soon got used to the joys of Meditation. My teenaged sons simply took an overnight bag, got into a bus and went off to Kanduboda, as and when they felt like it, where the resident Monks took charge of them, particularly Ven. Gampaha Pemasiri Thero. They were given enough good food, and any amount of leftover fruit and sweetmeats as well as dinner! They were gently guided into Meditation and all of them were able to concentrate quite well after some time. With this great experience, they soon learnt to be very self reliant, confident young men and they are still able to withstand the vicissitudes of life without complaining. Asoka and I never did have any problems with them and we hardly had to spend any money on them since they went to Ananda College, which was a Government School and later entered the local Universities for their higher studies. Also, as parents it gave us great joy to see the unity and closeness among all the children, who always helped each other to sort out any problems.

I remember it was my four sons who totally financed my elder daughter's wedding held on a grand scale at the Taj Samudra Hotel rooftop Ballroom. Asoka and I did not have to pay anything at all. Later on it was my daughter who really helped out her brothers to hold their weddings grandly, by helping to organize them, while their father and I were merely happy spectators, enjoying the events!

Even today, they never ask us for any money, even if they do need it. When I spent over 10 million rupees on the construction of the Ayya Khema Meditation Centre, they never queried anything, just saying,

"*Amma* (mother) we are glad that you are spending the money you have got for giving *Dhamma* Talks all over the world, to put up this Meditation Centre"

Actually it is they who give me some of the Business Class air tickets to travel around the world and help me in every way to propagate the *Dhamma.* Because they know of my frugal ways, they try to provide me with whatever little luxuries they can afford to give me, whenever I go to visit them at their homes.

6

TENDING TO MY MOTHER

At 89 years of age, my mother lived at the estate bungalow at Melsiripura, under the care of my elder brother, Keerthi. Though she came and stayed with us briefly from time to time, she preferred living there since she was very comfortable and familiar with the estate environment. But unfortunately all of a sudden she became paralysed and we were informed that she was warded at a hospital in Kurunegala. At that time we did not have a vehicle of our own, so when we heard the news, Asoka and I immediately set off to Kurunegala by bus.

When we reached the hospital, I rushed into see my mother. But before I could enter the room, a nurse came out and said,

"Ah, you have come to see Mrs. Goonewardene. By the way, I wonder who this 'Kusuma' she is calling out for, all the time? She seems to be waiting for this 'Kusuma' to come!"

I told the nurse,

"Actually, I am her daughter, Kusuma"

The nurse was quite pleased to see me and allowed me to enter the room.

Even though she was only partially conscious, my mother recognized me at once and said,

"Please Kusuma, take me to the Colombo Ayurvedic Hospital (Hospital for Indigenous Medicine). I know that they can help me. Also, I want to come and stay at your house in Maharagama. I know that your children love me and would not mind having me in your house, which is quite big enough for all of us!"

When I heard her pleading tones, I was in a great dilemma. I was already over burdened with my big family, full-time job, research activities and also my younger daughter had just been diagnosed with ovarian cancer, whereas my two sisters who were both married to doctors, were very well off, having large houses and vehicles and much more financial stability. So I thought that they could look after her much better.

With this in mind I told her,

"Mamma, you will be better off if you stay with my sisters. I don't even have a vehicle to take you to Colombo and I can't afford to hire a vehicle since I am not financially well off"

Then she promptly told me,

"Kusuma, please take the gold earrings off my ears, sell them and hire a vehicle to take me to your place! I don't want to go to any big houses. I only want to go to Maharagama with you!"

Since she started saying this over and over again for the whole hospital to hear, Asoka quickly removed her earrings, promising that we would be back soon to take her to our place. Then we tried to decide what best to do and finally we thought we would go to my younger brother and ask what we should do and enlist his help in this matter. So we set off to his place in Kandy and once we arrived there, we explained the situation to him and handed my mother's earrings over to him and requested him to lend us a car and the driver to take my mother home.

But instead of agreeing to this plan, he opposed the idea vehemently, saying,

"Are you mad, *Akka*? (elder sister) How can you possibly look after Mamma? As if you have nothing better to do! You have more than enough on your plate already! I certainly won't help you with this mad scheme! Let the others take up the burden!"

But after much explaining and pleading, we at last managed to get him to agree, and with great annoyance, he threw the car keys at me and told us grumpily to take the car and the driver, much against his wishes. We quickly grabbed the keys, thanked him and made one bee line to the estate to collect my mother's clothes and then went to the hospital, collected my mother and once we got to Colombo, admitted her straightaway into the Ayurvedic Hospital at Nawinna, which is situated quite close by to our house at Maharagama.

We kept my mother at the Ayurvedic Research Hospital at Nawinna for one month, where she was put under a strenuous course of treatment which included her being put into a "*Beheth Oruwa*" (a boat-like container filled with oils and medicine) in which she was immersed upto her neck for a couple of hours, oil massages, physiotherapy, etc. My sons used to take her food and other necessities every morning and evening, and Asoka and I too visited her daily. However, after one month, we were told to take her to the main Ayurvedic Hospital at Borella. So we shifted her there in an ambulance and we had to employ two attendants to stay with her day and night, which was quite expensive. However, we managed to keep her there for sometime, and then one day the doctors called us and said,

"We have done our best for this patient, but she is too old and she will not recover totally. We cannot keep her here any longer. So please take her home and look after her"

While wondering how we could cope with her and realizing that there was no one else who would help her anyway, we came back home and within a couple of days, we converted the large space which was meant to be the garage at our home into a little annexe with a red cemented floor and furnished it nicely with the pieces of furniture generously donated by our ever helpful and kind hearted neighbours, who were no strangers to the precarious situation faced by us. Soon "*Achchi Amma's*" (Grandmother's) room had a nice bed, a couple of chairs, carpets, a commode, as well as a wheel chair and I placed a Buddha Statue and a bunch of flowers which she could look at whilst lying on her bed, and happily brought her home to us.

Even though I did have much trepidation and anxiety as to how we were going to manage to look after her, soon we all realized what a joy it was to have her with us. We employed an attendant, who was a good natured woman, fond of a joke and she made all of us, including my mother, laugh at her jokes and nonsense. A well known *Vedamahattaya* (native physician), specialized in treating paralyzed patients, came home every week to treat my mother. I think we may have prepared over 100 decoctions prescribed by the *Vedamahattaya*, some of them having about 10-20 ingredients, including various herbs, roots and leaves of medicinal plants. My mother, thank goodness, drank all of it uncomplainingly, since she was anxious to get well soon. I remember going to the "Kapadias" shop in the Pettah and buying bottles and bottles of "Mahanarayana" oil which was massaged into her whole body, morning and evening.

After this treatment went on for about six months, my mother made quite a miraculous recovery and soon she could walk about for short distances, helped by my sons, sit up in bed and eat by herself. With this recovery, her thoughts turned more and more towards religion, and she used to say longingly how she would like to become a *Dasasil* Nun like her own younger sister who was one from her young days. So the whole household held a discussion on this, including my younger brother, Somachandra, and everyone agreed unanimously that we should make her wish come true, at least by proxy! So one fine day we held a small "ceremony" by ourselves, shaved her head, dressed her in a yellow blouse and a long yellow skirt and kept a yellow robe at her bedside! My mother was ecstatic by this transformation and occasionally my friends from the University would come and put her in the wheelchair and take her to the Mahamegaramaya Temple close by for *poojas*.

Soon my mother became a great attraction to all of us and the neighbourhood too. Every evening the whole family would gather in "*Achchi Amma's*"(Grand Mother's) room to spend some quality time together with a great deal of fun and laughter! Those were TV less days, and the children would ask her hundreds of questions about the past, which she would answer readily and sometimes the children found it quite hilarious to hear of things of yore and how things were done in those days. Being very proud of her ancestry, she would often speak about her father who was a "*Mudliyar*" (A village chieftain).

"You don't know children, but my father was a *Mudliyar,* a very important man in the village!"

My children would deliberately pretend to misunderstand their grandmother and say,

"Ah is that true *Achchi Amma,* was your father a "*Mudalali*"? (A shop keeper). What did he sell in his shop?"

"No, no! Aiyo these children don't know anything! It is not *Mudalali,* It is *Mudliyar*! A *Mudliyar* is the chief person in the village and everyone has to listen to him and take orders from him!"

Then seeing their amusement at this she would suddenly realize that she was being teased by them, and would join in their laughter herself!

When my younger brother visited her she would plead with him to take her to visit the estate at Melsiripura. When he told her that it is impossible for her to go there now, she would keep on insisting and in the end, when he couldn't escape her entreaties, he, along with my sons, would hold her and walk her up to the bare land belonging to someone, situated in front of our house and pretend that it was the Melsiripura estate!. They would point out the coconut, banana and other trees to her and say that her estate was doing very well and bearing fruit! My mother so child-like and guileless, would believe them totally and would come back to her room, much invigorated and delighted by her "excursion"!

Sometimes she would insist that my brother should take her to the Kelani River for bathing and swimming. (I think I mentioned before that my mother hailed from Matara, and her house was adjoining the Nilwala River and she was quite used to swimming and bathing in rivers). When she kept on asking him to take her there, he used to get quite annoyed at this absurd request and would say with great irony,

"Don't worry, Mamma, there is no need to go to the Kelani River. You will be bathing in the '*Anothaptha Vila*' (the lake in the heavens) very soon!"

Being unable to grasp the real implication of bathing in the heavenly lake, she was delighted by this idea and would beam happily at him, thinking of this great privilege!

Sometimes she would ask me to write a letter to her brothers who are in heaven, and ask them to send some gold and gems found in abundance there, to her poor parents! She spoke about her dead relations as if she could see and hear them. She had regressed to her childhood, maybe even borderline senile decay.

Going through this experience gave me much food for thought. I saw with my own eyes how my mother, once a lady of great power and authority, who ruled over her household and estate full of workers without any problems, taught at the Sunday School for many years, and was the President of the Women's Guild at the Temple and was responsible for organizing yearly pageants and other temple activities, could come to be like this and behave like a small child, totally dependent on others for her day to day

existence. The absolute truth of what Lord *Buddha* said about *Anicca* (impermanence) and *Anatta* (non-self, non-ownership) struck me like a thunderbolt, because it was coming true in front of my eyes. I saw that my mother was totally unable to control or stop her regression, her getting old and sick and senile. I also realized that this is the lot of every living being caught up in Samsara, there is no other alternative, unless you realize the supreme truth of *Nibbana*.

While I was tending my mother in this way, my younger daughter was terminally ill with cancer and was confined to her bed as well. So I had to care for them both with a great deal of mental anguish. One day when things became too overwhelming to bear, I wrote to my Guru and mentor, Ven. Nyanaponika Thero at Udawattekele in Kandy and asked for his help and advice to cope with this unbearable situation. He wrote back promptly,

"It is a rare opportunity you have got to care for both your mother and daughter who both need your help. Specially caring for your aged mother under such circumstances is indeed a great meritorious act. So be happy. Such a chance is given only to a few".

My mother lived with us upto 92 years of age and she passed away peacefully. I consoled myself by thinking that I had acquired much merit by looking after her to the best of my ability and not rejecting her at her hour of need.

"Children who are blessed by parents always succeed in whatever they do in life. They do not decline away and become failures"

Says the *Buddha*.

"Mātāpitanukampitassa, Mahanama Kulaputtassa, Vuddhiyeva paṭikankhitabbā, no parihāni"

Thus looking after parents, specially when they are old and feeble and in need of care, is a wonderful opportunity because it will bring solace in one's later life since in addition to all the merit acquired, one's own children are given a great lesson in life as to how they should tend to their parents when they get old and feeble too.

7

DAUGHTER'S DEATH

During this time, my second daughter, Aruni, was seriously ill. She was just 20 years old and was an undergraduate at the Sri Jayewardenepura University, where I myself was teaching. She had always been a brilliant student from her very young days, and at the University she was generally "Batch Top" in Physics. Some of the students who came from remote areas, used to ask for her help in understanding the lectures.

In addition to her studies, she could also sing and dance, as well as play the Sitar by ear. She was also a member of the University Table Tennis Team which won many inter University tournaments.

And then during her second year of studies at the University, she was diagnosed with cancer of the ovaries. We were devastated when the Doctors informed us of her condition, and I think it was our meditational experience that made Asoka and I bear up this terrible news. I firmly resolved to see the *Dhamma* in every possible way and go through with it, by looking after her the best I could. My daughter also had very successfully completed a residential Meditation Course at the Kanduboda Meditation Centre, and she too had the strength of character and stoicism to bear up her physical and mental suffering with a smile. She never asked,

"Why Me?"

Because she knew the nature of life and *Kamma* (cause and effect) only too well. I saw *Dukkha* (suffering) objectively, not subjectively. This is nothing peculiar to me and mine, I thought, when I saw hundreds other patients at the Cancer Hospital at Maharagama.

When I called my daughter, "my gem", "my jewel" "my fair and beautiful daughter", etc. she would smile weakly at me through her pain at the endearments, which would almost break my heart. Sometimes she would say,

"*Amma* (mother) if this is 'My Body', how can it give me so much of suffering?"

With this I could understand that she had comprehended the concept of *Anatta* (non-self) so well. This consoled me a great deal. Thus the *Dhamma* we learnt and lived by, aided us in every way to cope with the overwhelming *Dukkha* (suffering), the First Noble Truth, as expounded by the *Buddha* and we hardly lamented or needed any solace or consolation from others. She said one day, that her only regret was that she would be unable to do a job in the future and support the family.

She would sometimes say she would like to hear the *Dasadhamma Sutta*, *Satipatthana Sutta*, *Karaneeya Metta Sutta* or the *Sacca Vibhanga*. She never wanted to hear the *Bojjhangas*, possibly because the *Bojjhangas* were repeated for recovery from disease, and she knew that her illness was terminal. She knew most of the Pali words, and would ask me for the meanings of ones she didn't. So it was with full awareness and understanding that she listened to my chanting of the *Suttas*.

We used to talk and understand that suffering arises from our own mind and body, throughout *Samsara*, and the only palliative is to somehow get out of it. This is the nature of life and living, and Lord *Buddha* had proclaimed such an obvious truth, which is unchanging and universal.

We had such visions for her future, our beautiful and brilliant little daughter, who brought us so much of joy and happiness! We thought that she would do well anywhere in the world and

were so proud when she carried away all the class prizes! It was inconceivable that she who gave us so much joy could plunge us into this depths of misery and unhappiness.

I remember when she passed the 5th Standard Government Scholarship Examination with flying colours, we wanted to remove her from Musaeus College, which was a fee levying private school where she was studying, and admit her to Visakha Vidyalaya, a leading Government Girl's School, since we were not so well off financially at that time. So I went and met the Principal of Musaeus College and told her of our intention of removing Aruni and admitting her to Visakha. But the Principal would not hear of such a thing and immediately said,

"Please don't think of removing one of our best students from school. We will offer her free education right upto her A-Levels. Please let her be at Musaeus"

This is how she studied free at a fee levying school right upto her University entrance.

On the last day, she would not fall asleep at all. I sat with her the whole night and chanted all the *Suttas* she wanted to hear and repeated the *Dhammacakka* twice over and asked her whether she would like to go to the *Devaloka* (Heaven) or the *Brahmaloka* (Higher Heaven) since the *Dhammacakka* mentions the heavenly abodes. Then she smiled and said,

"*Amma*, there are six *Devalokas* and fourteen *Brahmalokas* to choose from!"

When it was 4:00 a.m. she noticed that I was tired and sleepy. So she told me go and sleep. Since I had to go to work the next day, I woke up Asoka and asked him to stay by her side and quickly fell into a deep sleep. After a couple of hours, when it was daylight, Asoka woke me and told me to make some sustagen for Aruni. So I went to her bedside and found that she was sleeping motionlessly. I touched her face gently and I knew that she had passed away peacefully. I immediately called Asoka and he couldn't believe that she was no more. So he rushed away and fetched our neighbour, Dr. Alahakoon, who soon confirmed that she had been dead for some time. It was the morning of 6th January.

I had no more tears to shed. I only saw that she was not suffering any more and was probably re-born in a divine abode. I refused to think of my loss and thought firmly that this is just the way with *Samsara*. If I continue to be in *Samsara* I will see and experience the suffering and deaths of many, many more children and other beloved people. There is simply no escape. This beautiful flower, still in the bud has faded away so quickly and harshly. Such is life and my resolve to escape from this terrible *Samsaric* journey, was rising within me urgently.

When the undertakers came to take her body away, Asoka asked me,

"Do you want her body to lie in the house?"

I said,

"No. I have done everything I could possibly do for her with my own two hands. So there is no need for her body to be brought back here"

We also decided to have a very quiet, private funeral and inform only our closest relations, keep the body at the Funeral Parlour for just one night and have the cremation at 8:00 a.m. the next morning. We inserted a very brief death notice in the morning newspapers, without even mentioning any names of the other children.

However, when we turned up at the cemetery, to our great astonishment, there seemed to be a few thousand people, gathered at the crematorium. I felt as if the whole University was there. Neighbours, friends, students, the place was full of known faces! Ven. Madihe Paññaseeha Thero and a large number of monks had come even without being informed. We saw one boy from the University, who I think was interested in my daughter, crying uncontrollably and the other person who lamented just as hard was my elder daughter, weeping for her sister.

After the funeral, we performed many religious ceremonies on the 3rd day, 7th day, 3rd month and so on, to bestow merit on Aruni. My student Monks at the University were ever willing to come and chant *Pirith* (*Suttas*) all night long and partake of *Dana* in memory of my daughter. I only had to mention it to one Monk and a whole van full would come because their sorrow too was so much, at the untimely passing away of their fellow student. Some

of these young student Monks are now erudite and well known senior Monks who are holding high posts, all over the world. When I meet them occasionally these days, they would always remember Aruni and would say,

"We came to your house many times and had *Dana* those days!"

On her Birthday the 27th of December, we used to have very big *Poojas*, *Danas* and other religious ceremonies. All her siblings contributed money for these events and each year was focused on this day, which brought all the family and friends together in her name.

I also remember that during this time I started to conduct regular Meditation Classes at our friend's, Mrs. Thalgodapitiya's house which was attended by many ladies from the neighbourhood and some of my friends. My Handbook was the "Heart of Buddhist Meditation" written by Ven. Nyanaponika Thero. I used to get up at 4:00 a.m. every Saturday, finish all my household tasks, prepare breakfast and lunch, have a bath and was at Mrs. Thal's house by 8:30 a.m. Then I used to conduct my class till 12:00 p.m. and come home to lunch. It gave me so much pleasure to share whatever little I knew of the Dhamma with my friends, who were so appreciative of my efforts and most of all it helped me to cope with the loss of my beloved daughter and understand the true nature of life through the *Dhamma*.

I can never be thankful enough to all the relations, friends and neighbours, who stood by us and helped in every way during this crucial period of our life. Every one who touched our lives in the

smallest way, helped us such a lot to deal with and overcome our terrible loss. In particular I remember the occasion when the Doctors at the Cancer Hospital told us that a brand new, very effective and costly drug for cancer had just come to the market abroad, and if we could get it, it would give a lot of relief to my daughter. At that time it was impossible for us even to think of getting this medicine, considering its cost and the difficulty of getting it sent here. Then our *kalyana mittas*, Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, the Founder of the Sarvodaya Movement of Sri Lanka and his wife, Mrs. Neetha Ariyaratne, heard about this, and they immediately got the drug through the WHO, and delivered it to us personally, carefully preserving it in ice. I am so happy that this friendship too endures to this day and we meet quite often to conduct religious programmes together.

8

TURNING TO BUDDHISM

In 1969, The Asia Foundation and the National Science Foundation (NSF) together offered me two scholarships to study Molecular Biology for a MSc Degree at the Ball State University, Indiana, USA. The NSF offered to cover the full course fee and the board and lodging expenses in the USA, while the Asia Foundation gave me an air ticket to travel round the world. It was in a way a lovely adventure since I was able to travel to so many countries, which at that time was quite a rare thing. I started from the UK, visited France, Italy, Greece, etc, and went across

the Pacific to the USA and returned home through Hawaii, Japan and Singapore. At the start it was rather difficult to find my way all alone, but I soon got used to getting in and out of huge airports in unfamiliar countries. But my itinerary was so well organized that there was always someone to meet me at the airports and they had no problem recognizing me in my bright coloured sarees!. These kind volunteers looked after me so well and took me sightseeing in all the countries and kept me in their homes and treated me like an honoured guest. Even though a long, long time has passed, I wish to remember all of them with gratitude for all they did for me.

But in spite of all this, I was terribly homesick. I missed the children badly, most of all the youngest 5-year old twins. Of course I knew that they were in safe hands because my mother-in-law had kindly volunteered to come and stay with them until I returned home and Asoka and the servants were all available at hand. Still, I remember I cried so much in UK that my kind mentor there told me,

"Kusuma, once when I was sick, I had to leave my children and go to hospital. I thought that my children would miss me and cry so I was very upset. But when I came back home they only said, 'We are fine mother. Why did you come back so soon?' The same thing will happen if you give up everything and decide to go home. So don't do that."

So even though I really wanted to give up this excellent opportunity and go back home, I decided to proceed to the USA. In a way I was glad I did so, because the work at the University was

very interesting. For a whole month, I studied pond water under the Phase Microscope trying to understand the origins of life on this earth. The lab equipment was amazing! Huge microscopes, centrifuges, etc. The weekly quiz by the Professors was most interesting and I was able to fare quite well at these, thanks to the excellent education I had at Ananda College back home. During the first couple of weeks, I could not understand most of the lectures, because of the unfamiliar "American Accent". My colleagues used to tell me that,

"Kusuma we find it difficult to understand you sometimes because you speak "British English!"

Anyway, all of a sudden it all became very familiar and I was able to understand everything. Another thing I missed was the spicy Sri Lankan food! The chillies, the coconut, the other spices...how I longed for these! So in compensation, I used to pour bottlefuls of Tabasco sauce over all my food, much to the horror of my colleagues! But the pastries, cakes, doughnuts, etc were delicious and the coffee was lovely.

In the USA, I was also able to travel widely, seeing many places of interest like the Grand Canyon and visiting some famous Universities. It was fascinating to see how the Ely Lily Medical Industry was manufacturing tablets and capsules, thousands at a time. I was also lucky enough to see the first moon landing. I remember we watched Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins and Edwin Aldrin stepping on the surface of the moon for the first time in history, for nearly seven hours on a huge wide screen TV.

My fascination with Molecular Biology was because I thought that this field of study will supply some answers to the many questions always arising in my mind, such as,

"What is the beginning of Life?", "Why are we born?", "Why do we all have to die?," etc. But when I realized that our daily regimen of studies was not giving the answers to any of these questions, I began to question our Professors on these lines since they were the "experts" in studying the molecular basis of life. However, their only reply was,

"Science has yet to discover all that!"

I was quite disheartened by this and started thinking why I should spend so much time and energy, in a somewhat futile quest, since it looked as if science had to go a long, long way to answer the most fundamental questions regarding life. Looking back now, I think this was the turning point in my life. I felt that I had to turn elsewhere in my quest of discovery and because of my life rooted in Buddhism from very young days, I instinctively felt that the answers may lie therein. Then the thought came that it would be better for me to join a Sri Lankan University and start studying Buddhism more intensely.

So, I decided to bid good bye to my studies in the USA and returned to Sri Lanka. I think it was one of the happiest days of my life!

On my return home, I did not lose sight of my goal. So having made some inquiries, I finally decided to enroll myself to do an external Degree course in Pali, Buddhist Philosophy and English, at the Sri Jayawardenepura University at Gangodawila, which was fairly close to our home at Maharagama. At last I felt that I had reached my true element. Little by little I realized that Buddhist Philosophy was giving me the answers to my questions and my inner self was rejoicing at this discovery. So my enthusiasm towards my studies was extreme and I remember going to various temples and visiting scholar monks like Ven. Hedigama Indrajothi Thero, to study Pali and Buddhism. I also remember going to the Sunethra Devi Pirivena Temple for extra classes, changing two buses to travel, even though it was hard to do so after a whole day's teaching! But I was fairly young, able to work hard and properly motivated. So at the age of 44, I was able to pass my BA Degree with Distinction Passes for Buddhist Philosophy and English and a Credit Pass for Pali.

During this time I got to know that there was a vacancy for an Instructor in English at the English Department of the Sri Jayawardenepura University. I immediately sat for the competitive selection examination for this post, and due to my good fortune, I passed it and was recruited to the staff of the University. I was overjoyed at this because in addition to getting an interesting job of teaching the University students, I could now get free access to the University Library and also continue my studies there as well, without any restrictions.

Teaching English as a second language to the University students was comparatively easy, because the standard was quite basic. As such, there was hardly any preparation unlike the teaching of science. Also the students spent more of their time on their regular Course Work, so we sometimes had to cancel the English classes because attendance was poor. But this was a great boon to me because I was able to spend all my free time in the library reading a large selection of books on Buddhism in all three languages, Sinhalese, English and Pali, since I was fairly proficient in all three of them.

The University environment was so conducive to further my studies that I soon began to prepare for my Master's Degree in Buddhism. I remember with gratitude Prof. Jinadasa Perera, who helped me with the qualifying examination and once I passed my MAQ, I presented my Master's Thesis on *Satipatthana*. My tutor was Ven. Prof. Henpitagedara Nyanavasa Thero, and under his able tutelage, I was enthralled to read the Nikaya Texts and follow my MA lectures. The study of *Satipatthana* at a research level gave me so much real insight into *Vipassana* Meditation. This research paper is now published with a grant from Taiwan, for free distribution.

My Thesis named, "Sati in Buddhist Meditation" covers many important aspects of the *Satipatthana* and *Vipassana* Meditation. My own meditational experiences at the Kanduboda Vipassana Meditation Centre under the guidance of its Chief Incumbent at that time, Ven. Kahatapitiye Sumathipala Thero, gave me a lot of insight and inspiration to complete the study. Some of the topics

discussed therein are as follows:

1. What is "*Sati*"
2. What unwholesome thoughts are suppressed by *Sati*.
3. Development of "*Kusala*" (Wholesome Thoughts)
4. Development of Wisdom
5. "*Anapanasati*" (Mindfulness on Breathing) as a preliminary for "*Samatha*" (Concentration)
6. *Metta Bhavana* (Meditation on Loving Kindness) to develop "*Samadhi*" (Concentration)
7. Art of Living in the Present moment
8. How to be aware of one's physical and verbal actions.
9. Awareness of one's mental states, etc.

Satipatthana covers the study of all physical and mental states of the human psyche and the incessant change which leads to dissatisfaction and unhappiness. It also explains the utter subjective nature of life that is caught up in worldly issues endlessly. In the study of *Satipatthana*, one perceives clearly how the mind is changing from moment to moment and along with it how both the body and the environment is changing, thus making it impossible to ensure that a constant "supply line" of only good things comes one's way. However much science and technology may strive to produce good things to sustain life, the natural phenomena of old age, sickness and death is in any case unavoidable. So, it is never possible to achieve an utopia of perfect happiness, however much one tries to do so. Hence the *Anatta* (Non-Self) Doctrine is depicted clearly in this study.

Since searching for happiness through material acquisitions is really a dead end to progress, the best thing to do is to come to terms with life's incessant change. In *Satipatthana* Meditation, we focus on our own body and mind and observe the constant change again and again and again. By and by with practice one would be able to see the structure and function of both body and mind objectively. Then one is able to see life's trials and tribulations objectively and not subjectively. When this understanding is there, one will not become perturbed by either the good things or the bad things that come one's way. One does not need to ask, "Why Me?" One knows that this is just the true nature of things, the "*swabhava dharma*" (Natural phenomena) and is able to think,

"Oh, why should I worry? Everything will change sooner or later. This is just the way of the world!"

It was at this time that I also started to read the *Theri Gatha* Texts (Psalms of the Buddhist Nuns), which were truly inspirational, very often bringing tears to my eyes. More and more my mind was bending towards *Nibbana* (enlightenment). Worldly pleasures seemed to be so empty, but infused with *Metta* (Loving Kindness) I was able to perform all the worldly activities with love and devotion so that I did all my duties to the family and as much as possible towards the society as a lay woman. But all the time my mind was paying homage to the *Buddha*.

"**Itthi bhāvam no kin kairā**
Cittam hi susamāhité"

"When the mind is purified and stilled, what difference is womanhood?"

Lord *Buddha* once said to Ven. *Bhikkhuni* Abhirupi Nanda Theri, who was supposed to be a great beauty, admired by all,

"Āturaṃ asucim puti, passa nande samussayam
Uggharantaṃ paggharantaṃ bālānaṃ adhipatthitaṃ
Yathā idam tathā etam, yathā etam tathā idaṃ
Dhātuso suññato passa ma lokaṃ punarāgamum
Attānudiṭṭhim uhacca, evam maccutarosia"

"This body is a sickness, full of excretory matter. Oh Nanda, look at this heap of filth. Oozing upwards and flowing downwards (sweat, mucous, saliva, urine, blood, faecal matter, etc), yet highly valued by the ignorant. My body is the same as any other body. So remove the thorn, "I, Me and Mine" stuck in your mind and overpower death. See the body only as elements, *Pathavi, Apo, Tejo, Vayo* (Hardness, Liquidity, Heat, Air). Understand that there is no core in 'Me'. When atoms are split, what escapes is only locked-in energy. So where is 'Me?' "

Thus I finally found the answers to the questions that were bothering me for a long time. I found that the understanding of the concept of *Anatta* (Non-self), made me feel lighter and more kind and friendly towards the world. Life and living definitely became much less of a challenge because I did not react too harshly to the problems of daily living. I also became more and more motivated to study Buddhist Philosophy and with my practice of Meditation, I soon learnt the art of integrating *Dhamma* with day to day living.

9

EFFORTS TO DEVELOP THE DASASIL MATA MOVEMENT

(Ten Precept Buddhist Nuns' Order)

After reading the *Therigatha*, my mind was filled with thoughts of enlightenment of women. My mother's younger sister was a Ten Precept Buddhist Nun (*Dasasil Matha*). In fact, I remember that on occasions when she was annoyed by my father or one of us, my mother always used to say,

"I will go and become a *Dasasil Matha* and stay at the *Upasikaramaya* (Ashram) at Biyagama!"

During this time I met Ven.Sister Sudharma, who was a ten precept nun and a graduate of the University of Colombo. She was a very well known and highly respected Buddhist Nun who was teaching Buddhism at my daughters' school, Musaeus College. After having some discussions with her, I became convinced that the lives of these Ten Precept Buddhist Nuns should be researched and documented since most of them were living in obscurity and want, not recognized as a respected part of society.

This sowed the seed of a PhD research on the *Dasasil Matha* Movement in Sri Lanka, in my fertile mind. So far no one had ever spared any serious thought to such a research. Buddhist Monks were educated and erudite and generally had a prestigious position in society, whereas the nuns certainly did not. While I was toying with this idea, a German lady named Ilse Ledermann, who was a Buddhist *Upasika* (Buddhist lay woman) dressed in white, arrived in Sri Lanka.

Actually, she had been in Thailand and there she had been making inquiries about someone who was knowledgeable in Buddha *Dhamma* who could host her in Sri Lanka where she was hoping to stay for sometime. Luckily for me, that person in Thailand had given Ilse my address. So she sent me a letter introducing herself and her interest in Buddhism and asking whether I could host her and help her in her quest for enhancing her knowledge. I was surprised and pleased at this request and

promptly replied her saying that I would be delighted to host her and that my house would be always open to her. So she arrived in Sri Lanka and it was a pleasure to have her with us because she was such a friendly, educated and wise person. In due course she found many friends in Colombo and elsewhere and she traveled to many parts of the country meeting many people and learning more and more about the position of Buddhist women in our country. Since her mailing address in Sri Lanka was our house, she always came to Maharagama regularly to see us and collect her mail, even when she stayed with other friends.

After being in Sri Lanka for sometime, Ilse decided that her path to enlightenment would start here, and decided to become ordained as a *Dasasil Matha* (a Ten Precept Buddhist Nun) under the tutelage of Ven. Narada Thero at the Vajirarama Temple in Colombo.

The day before her ordination she came to me in great frustration and told me that she had sent her son in Germany a large sum of money, asking him to come and attend her Ordination Ceremony, but so far she had had no communication from him at all. So she was quite worried about him because she had not seen him for some time and did not know how to contact him from here. Those were the days in 1970, when overseas calls were not easy to obtain and communication by letters took many weeks. Then I immediately thought of our friend, Mr. Lenin Jayasinghe, who was attached to the Colombo General Post Office and asked him for some help to contact Ilse's son in Germany. Thanks to Lenin, who spared no efforts to help us and took numerous overseas calls

and somehow managed to trace her son and got her a person to person call. She was so thankful to find that her son was keeping fine and that he had indeed received all the money she had sent. However, he was unable to come for the ordination since he had just changed to a new job and did not have any leave.

The following day she was ordained as *"Ayya Khema"*. *"Ayya"* means *"Arya"* in Pali and the name signified that she had become one of the *Arya Sangha.* (an Enlightened One). My friendship with Ayya Khema endured until her death in 1997. She spent a colossal sum of money on the construction of an Ashram at the Parappuduwa Nun's Island, close to the Polgasduwa Island where the famous German monks, Ven. Nyanatiloka and Ven. Nyanaponika lived. She also built many other Ashrams and Temples all over the world, such as the Buddha Haus and Metta Vihara in Germany. She is the person who really inspired me and gave me much encouragement to take up my research study of the *Dasasil Mata* Movement in Sri Lanka.

Thus I started on my research by visiting many *Aramas* (abodes of the *Dasasil Matas*) in and around Colombo, collecting data about the lives and aspirations of the *Dasasil Matas.* I also visited the *Buddha Sasana* Ministry, the Sarvodaya Movement, the Buddhist Congress, the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), the Public Trustee's office and such other institutions, who could supply me with various data on the *Dasasil Matas.* It was quite a difficult time for me personally too, since I had to look after my mother who was 92 years and paralysed and my younger daughter, just 20 years, diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Finances also

were not readily available, and I had to spend quite a lot to travel to various places and spend a fair amount of time in doing research. Luckily, I was able to get a small research grant from the Colombo YMBA under the Sir Baron Jayatilleke Trust. It was not much, but I managed to carry on my work since I was quite used to working on a frugal budget.

During this time, a team of scholars from the USA, involved with a Student Exchange Programme, was here in Sri Lanka to carry out various research studies. Amongst them were Prof. Lowell Bloss, Prof. George Bond and Prof. John Holt. Prof. Lowell Bloss was most interested in the *Dasasil Matas* and their way of life, so much so that he wanted to carry out a research study on them himself, as a Post Doctoral Research Project. Since he came to know that I too was already involved in the same study, he came and asked me whether I would help him by accompanying himself and his family to go and visit *Dasasil Matas* in remote villages and act as interpreter and go-between. This suited me just fine and I traveled round Sri Lanka with them for almost one year, doing translations and interpretation of the stories told by the *Dasasil Matas* for Prof. Bloss's Thesis. In the meantime I too was able to gather enough and more data for my own research, and Prof. Bloss being a sociologist, taught me how to process and analyze the data for the Thesis.

This whole exercise was a very revealing one for me. At first the *Dasasil Matas* whom we met, showed a stoic resistance towards revealing their life stories and experiences to us. They almost resented our probing into their lives saying,

"Why do you want to know about me? I would like to be left alone. No one has ever done anything good for us, and I don't know why you are questioning me like this!"

So we had to do a great deal of explaining, and then finally they would understand that ours was an academic exercise, and then they went ahead with the narration of their stories. The most striking thing they said was that when they became *Dasasil Matas,* at first they were under the impression that they would be equally recognized and respected by society as the Buddhist Monks, but to their chagrin, soon discovered that neither the Monks, nor the lay people and not even the Government gave them any kind of recognition or respect. They were not ordained as *Bhikkhunis* and hence not entitled to be a part of the ordained *Sangha* community, even though they were shaven headed and wearing yellow clothes. (which are not robes). Because they had left hearth and home, they did not belong to the lay community either and as a result they were a marginalized community in society, most of the time eking out a very poor living and existing under difficult circumstances hardly having the means even to fulfill their religious aspirations.

This sociological survey was done according to the prescribed methods under the guidance of Prof. Lowell Bloss. In addition to our personal interviews with the *Dasasil Matas,* we also prepared a questionnaire and sent it to a large number of *Dasasil Matas,* through the Ministry of *Buddha Sasana,* with a self addressed envelope, to be completed and returned to us. On Full Moon Poya Days we visited many temples to gather further information from the Monks and lay people about *Dasasil Matas.* I even managed

to get special permission to study the private correspondence of the late Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala, who was responsible for the renaissance of Buddhism in Sri Lanka which was heavily under the influence of our former Colonial Masters, and found that he had held very positive ideas on the ordination of women and the establishment of a *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka.

The main Topics discussed in my Thesis are as follows:

1. The identification of the female order during the times of the *Buddha* and the different levels of ordination – the Novice, *Sikkhamana* Ten Precepts, Fully Ordained *Bhikkhuni.*

2. The *Bhikkhuni* Order in India, its initiation, development and disappearance.

3. Sri Lankan women receiving ordination from *Bhikkhuni* Sanghamitta, from India. Sri Lankan *Bhikkhunis* carrying the Ordination to China and its final disappearance from Sri Lanka.

4. Buddhist Monks in the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa eras, division of Sects. Disappearance of the Monks' Order.

5. Loss of Royal patronage to the *Sasana* – a historical sketch.

6. The resurrection of the Monk's Order from Burma and Thailand.

7. Ten Precept Nuns' Orders of Burma and Thailand.

8. Arising of the order of *Dasasil Matas* in 1905. Case Studies – Sister Sudharmacari, Ven. Mavicari, Lady Blake Aramaya, etc.

9. Present situation of the *Dasasil Matas*, arising of *Aramas*, their contribution towards the *Buddha Sasana* and society. Life stories of Sunita *Dasasil Mata* and Sudharma *Dasasil Mata* of Biyagama.

10. Dawn of the *Bhikkhuni* Ordination.

Unfortunately at the time that I submitted this Thesis to the Sri Jayawardenepura University, a situation of grave civil unrest was prevailing all over the country, in addition to the existing war in the North and East. The whole country was practically at a standstill, and schools and Universities closed down indefinitely. So under the circumstances, my Thesis too failed to receive due attention. Also, the reference to a *Bhikkhuni* Order therein was frowned upon because most people were of the opinion that the *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka was lost forever and cannot be resurrected until the advent of Maitreya *Buddha*. So it never got a chance to be assessed as a PhD Research.

However, my interest in the subject was a consuming one and I refused to give up on my fact finding mission. Then Professor Bloss said that he wanted to meet His Excellency the President, J.R. Jayawardene, to inform him of his sociological survey of the *Dasasil Matas* and tell him of his observations and experiences.

On hearing this, I immediately told him that I too would like to accompany him to meet H.E., the President.

So both of us had a memorable discussion with H.E., the President, where I got a very good chance to speak of all the trials and tribulations faced by the *Dasasil Matas*, specially in remote areas, and I spoke with great conviction as I had first hand experience of all this because of our joint study. When I insisted that as the Head of State he should also care for the Buddhist Nuns as much as for the Monks, he smiled and said,

"Madam, I am not going to put my finger into such a controversial thing!"

But seeing that I was not going to give up my quest so easily, because I kept on saying,

"Your Excellency, it is not fair that these Nuns should lead lives of such hardship without any kind of support from the State. You must at least have a separate section in the Ministry of *Buddha Sasana* for the welfare of these *Dasasil Matas*."

He then said that he would entrust his wife with the responsibility of sorting out this issue. A short while later Mrs. Elena Jayawardene came in and we lost no time in speaking about our mission. She was most interested in the discussion, especially when I told her,

"Madam Elena, in the past, the king looked after the interests of the Monks in Society, while it was the responsibility of the Queen to look after the Nuns. Therefore, we are appealing to you to take up this mission and see to the welfare of these *Dasasil Matas* who have left hearth and home to tread the Path to enlightenment"

Then she thought for a while and said,

"Please send me a letter giving all the facts and your recommendations so that I can proceed with this matter"

So we thanked her and left. That same evening, Professor Bloss, my husband Asoka and I sat down and drafted an eleven paged letter to be sent to Mrs. Jayawardene. But as I mentioned before, this was the time of the "Black July" when Sri Lanka was in the throes of civil unrest and ethnic warfare, with killing and burning of buildings and curfews happening on an hourly basis and the Government was thoroughly involved in maintaining law and order and keeping the peace. So even we were doubtful whether our letter would receive any attention at all under the circumstances.

But to our surprise and pleasure, after about three months, when things were more settled in the country, we received a letter from H.E. the President, acknowledging our letter sent to his wife, and requesting us to meet with the Hon. Minister of *Buddha Sasana*, Mr. E.L.B.Hurulle, to proceed with this matter. Since Prof. Bloss had returned to the USA by this time, it was I who had to go and meet the Hon. Minister all by myself, and he very kindly gave me a hearing and then put me on to the Commissioner of Buddhist Affairs, Mr. Eardley Ratwatte and the Permanent Secretary to the Ministry, Mr. Walter Ladduwahetty , recommending that they should do their best to help me with this mission.

Thereafter I was in and out of the Ministry of *Buddha Sasana*, until I managed to convince the officials that they should establish

a separate section within the Ministry to deal with the issue of the *Dasasil Mata* order. Once this was done, we were able to also organize the payment of a small stipend to the nuns to cover their day-to-day expenses and traveling. Subsequently the doors of the Maligakanda Pirivena (An educational institute for Buddhist Monks at Maligakanda), which up to then was exclusively reserved for the Buddhist Monks, was also opened for the education of the Nuns, with the lecturers kindly volunteering to teach them even after hours. I am so happy to say that this continued for some years and many Nuns followed these courses and gained their BA Degrees and some even their Masters Degrees in Buddhism and related fields.

The Nuns were issued with official Identity Cards, and were summoned every month to the John de Silva Memorial Hall in Colombo, to meet and discuss plans for the organization and welfare of the Movement. We managed to organize a Flag Day to raise funds and Ven . Ayya Khema organized a special Conference on Buddhist Nuns at the Nalanda College Hall in Colombo, which was attended by a large number of *Dasasil Matas* and which was given much publicity through the media, which helped to give prominence to the *Dasasil Mata* Movement in Sri Lanka.

Here I must mention that my task with the Ministry of *Buddha Sasana* was greatly aided by the fact that the Commissioner at that time was Mr. Eardly Ratwatte. One day when the peon had ushered me into his room, Mr. Ratwatte asked me,

"Why didn't you tell me that you are Asoka's wife?"

Being surprised at this query, I asked,

"Why should I have to tell you that?"

Then he told me that he had met Asoka at the Ministry of Education the day before, and my husband had asked him,

"What are you doing with my wife?"

Being quite bewildered he had asked Asoka,

"Who is your wife?"

"Why, didn't you know? Kusuma"

"Kusuma is your wife?"

Apparently, the two of them had been classmates at Trinity College, Kandy and had lost touch with each other for many years. So they had had a hilarious reunion and because of this, he told me,

"Kusuma, hereafter please do not wait for the peon, just open the door and come in if you need anything!"

This was a great opportunity for me to fulfill my aspirations, so I told him,

"Now you have got the ok from H.E. the President, the Minister of *Buddha Sasana* as well as the Secretary to the Ministry. So you have to go ahead and do your very best to espouse the cause of *Dasasil Matas.* If you don't take up this worthy challenge, the future generations will hold you responsible for it!"

Then he laughed and said,

"No, no, I will not shirk my duty. I will have to do this. There is no other way!"

Thus the Nuns came to be supported by the Ministry of *Buddha Sasana* until his retirement and the next Commissioner, Mr. Abhaya Weerakoon too, was a gentleman who generously supported this cause. However, unfortunately after his tenure of office the Ministry of Buddha Sasana came under a Monks' Advisory Board, who closed down the separate section of the Ministry which dealt with the Nuns, and clamped down on all the privileges granted to them, claiming that since the Nuns were not ordained *Bhikkhunis*, they were not entitled to be registered or recognized as a part of the Order of the *Maha Sangha.*

10

RESEARCH ON BHIKKHUNI VINAYA

Then in 1987, an International Buddhist Nun's Conference was organized at Buddha Gaya in India. Ven. Ayya Khema was one of the Chief organizers of this event and she told me quite emphatically,

"Kusuma, you have to attend this Conference"

But this was not so easy mainly because of financial constraints. So after thinking hard, I approached the Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of *Buddha Sasana,* Mr. Walter Ladduwahetty, and told him about this Conference and confessed that even though I had been invited to participate, I was unable to do so because of the lack of funds. He being aware of my commitment to the cause, immediately informed the Hon. Minister about this matter and somehow convinced him that I should be sponsored by the state to attend the Conference. Even today I think of Mr. Ladduwahetty with gratitude for all the support and help he gave me at this instance.

I was happy beyond words that now I had the opportunity to attend the Conference, as well as visit India for the first time. Then another thought struck me. That is, to fulfill a wish of my younger daughter who passed away sometime ago. While my daughter was awaiting her results for the Advanced Level Examination, she went to the Vipassana Meditaton Centre at Kanduboda for a two week Meditation retreat. While she was there, the Chief Resident Nun, Ven. Dhammapali, looked after her so well, providing her with special food and guidance. When my daughter was preparing to leave the Centre after completing her Meditation Course, while bidding the Nun good bye, asked her,

"Venerable, have you ever been to India?"

The Nun answered,

"No".

Then my daughter told her,

"Someday, when I have earned enough money, I will send you on a pilgrimage to India because I have no other way to show my gratitude for all you did for me"

However, unfortunately my daughter passed away shortly afterwards so she could not fulfill her promise to Ven. Dhammapali.

Thus while thinking about my own forthcoming trip to India, I began to wonder whether I could somehow find a sponsor to fund the expenses for her air ticket and sundry expenses, so that we could visit India together. With this thought uppermost in my mind, I approached many funding institutions, but did not succeed at first. But finally to my joy, the Public Trustee, who held my uncle's property in trust after his demise, consented to fund the Nun's trip to India.

So I was able to attend the Conference in India with Ven. Dhammapali and after that we traveled to all the sacred Buddhist shrines. It was a wonderful experience and I felt the presence of my departed daughter by my side all along the way, giving me happiness and courage at every turn.

This International Buddhist Nun's Conference was another turning point in my life. It was very well attended by Nuns from all over the world and as a person who had already done an extensive survey of the Nun's order in Sri Lanka, my contribution towards this cause was much appreciated and recognized. When the action committees were appointed, my friend, Dr. Friedgard Lottermoser from Germany was appointed as the Chairperson of the Theravada Vinaya Research Committee, and I was selected as her assistant.

A newly organised Movement of highly erudite and concerned Buddhist Nuns and laywomen was also formed by the name of "Sakhyadhita" (Daughters of the Buddha), headed by Ven. Ayya Khema, Dr. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh and Ven. Jampa Tsederon. Actually the name "Sakyadhita" was coined by my friend, Dr. Lottermoser, who is an excellent Pali scholar, in addition to speaking many other languages. Today Sakyadhita is a worldwide movement, having conferences and meetings in many countries.

The following year, Dr. Lottermoser invited me to Germany and sent me an air ticket, to make an indepth study of the *Bhikkhuni Vinaya,* on behalf of the Vinaya Research Committee of the Sakyadhita Movement. She was the Editor of the critical Pali Dictionary of the Pali Text Society in London. Also she had many rare volumes on *Bhikkhuni Vinaya* written in Burmese and Thai languages, in which she was as fluent as her own mother tongue. In fact, her MA Degree was on the Pali Commentaries of Buddhaghosa and the PhD was on **Paṭṭhāna** (the 7th Book of *Abhidhamma*) which was completed in Burma. She is indeed a scholar par excellence. Even today she remains my *Kalyana Mitta,* after having ordained as Ven. Samaneri Akincana and usually spends her 3 months of the "Vassana" (Rains retreat) with me at my Olaboduwa Ayya Khema Ashram and financially helps me in the upkeep of the place. Being so knowledgeable about *Abhidhamma,* it is she who taught me the recitation of **Paṭṭhāna** while residing at my Centre.

So at her invitation, I flew to Germany also carrying some most valuable Texts as well and Commentaries and Subcommentaries written in Pali, Sinhalese and English, as well as some rare books on the subject borrowed from Agga Maha Pandita Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Nayaka Thero, and stayed with her at her apartment, visited the University where she was teaching on a daily basis, and studied all aspects of *Bhikkhuni Vinaya.* Luckily, my knowledge of Pali and English was quite adequate to follow her instructions.

Thus we worked three months, morning, noon and late into night sometimes, so that we were able to cover one whole year of study within this short period. I remember she did not fail to admonish me even if I relaxed for a moment! I recall one instance when it was snowing outside and having never seen a snowfall before, I was staring fascinated out of the window at the marvelous sight. Dr. Lottermoser spotted me away from my desk and quietly told me,

"Kusuma, I think we must get back to work because you have not come here all the way just to look at snow!"

I am eternally grateful to my friend Dr. Lottermoser for taking so much trouble to teach me about *Bhikkhuni Vinaya,* a subject hitherto practically unknown in Sri Lanka. I found the 311 *Bhikkhuni Vinaya* Rules and their references in the texts, *Kankhavitarani* and Samanta *Pasadika.* At the end of three grueling months of study, I returned to Sri Lanka. Even though I was fairly conversant with the Sutta and *Abhidhamma Pitakas,*

the subject of *Bhikkhuni Vinaya* was so novel and fascinating that I contemplated writing another PhD Research Paper on the subject and decided to register at the Buddhist and Pali University in Sri Lanka to commence my studies.

However, it took me nearly ten years to complete this Thesis, because I also had to research the other *Vinaya* traditions such as the Mahayana and Tibetan. So I had to visit Korea and the Tibetan Institute at Saranath in India. My grateful thanks go to Prof. Oliver Abeynayake who spent a lot of his valuable time having discussions with me on the subject and giving me guidelines. Actually he was of the opinion that the *Bhikkhuni Vinaya* was presently not in use in most Theravada countries and as such nobody had bothered to carry out any studies on the subject before. This was true, because I was unable to find any previous researches, so I had to rely on Dictionaries, libraries, archives, encyclopedias, discussions with scholars, etc., to get the meanings of some of the archaic words in *Vinaya* in the Pali language.

Often the *Vinaya* rule by itself is difficult to understand. But the story that led to it being formulated, gives the circumstances and the reasons which clarifies it clearly. Some of the minor *Vinaya* rules are not applicable in today's context and therefore are not practiced. Some *Vinaya* rules are exempted under certain conditions. Some can be confessed if breached, and be absolved. As such, a research into *Vinaya* is of paramount importance for the proper function of the Buddhist Ordained Community.

I am happy to state here that my Thesis, "*Bhikkhuni Vinaya*" which was first written in English has now been translated to Sinhalese and this publication is now widely used by the Buddhist Nuns and *Bhikkhunis* in Sri Lanka as a handbook for reference.

The *Buddha* at his passing away into *Parinibbana*, gave permission to the *Sangha* Community to do away with any minor rules that would become obsolete with the passing away of time. But the Theravada *Sangha* Community has apparently not paid much attention to this and as a result, the observation of the *Vinaya* rules in the Theravada Tradition has become somewhat haphazard and lax. However, the Mahayana Tradition has deleted some minor rules that are not applicable in modern times and as such they are able to observe the rules much more strictly because they are not overburdened with unnecessary regulations.

When I visited the Fo-Guan Shan Monastery of the Mahayana Tradition in Taiwan, I found that there were 800 Buddhist Nuns and 400 Monks in residence. Even with such a large number of *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis* living within the same premises, their discipline and conduct were impeccable. I was impressed to see the vast dining hall which could accommodate 4000 persons at a time, inclusive of lay men and lay women. The discipline within the Monastery is so perfect that visitors will never see a single Monk or Nun wasting their time doing nothing or laughing or chatting or misbehaving in any way. They march in perfect order and silence to the dining hall, chant beautifully for ten minutes, then have their meal noiselessly and in less than half an hour, they leave the hall. It was quite amazing to see that there isn't a drop of

water or a grain of rice dropped on the shining, polished, floor! Each person carries out his or her assigned task to perfection and the *Bodhisatta* Vow is adhered to very strictly, in their speech and action. Chanting and Rituals are very well organized and they go into retreats sometimes and meditate in the hills for three to six months continuously. Thus their *Vinaya* is a living force propelling them forward towards enlightenment.

My research into the arising of the *Bhikkhuni* Order in India during the time of the *Buddha*, was somewhat complicated because the only textual source was the Cullavagga Pali. The study of this text showed many contradictions and many scholars are of the opinion that the book had been compiled latterly and that there are many interpolations and interpretations by other, perhaps Brahmin and Jain masters, who rose up after the *Parinibbana* of the *Buddha*. My own observations, specially on the *Ashta Garudharma* (Eight Special Rules for *Bhikkhunis*), which actually does not belong to the main *Patimokkha Vinaya*, detected many contradictions, which are quite doubtful. In fact, I thought that my Professors and examiners would not accept my observations and criticisms about this *Vinaya* Text. Fortunately, they seem to have agreed with my arguments and accepted my submission and granted me the PhD at long last.

I must be thankful that my knowledge of the Pali language became a great advantage when completing this Thesis. Pali is the language of the *Buddhas* and it is a language reserved exclusively for original Buddhist Texts and writings. There are no obscene words or phrases in the Pali language and this is why it is different

to any other language. The study of Pali is absolutely necessary for a person wanting to make a serious study of the Buddhist Philosophy. The translation of the Buddhist Texts into Sinhalese is more scholarly and partially Sanskritised and hence more difficult to understand, whereas the original Pali is much more clear and lucid. It is a great pity that the Pali Language is no longer taught as a subject in schools. The Pali Tripitaka is a study that gives endless education towards developing the human mind and rids the mind of confusion and depression that usually leads to various diseases that are psychologically caused.

11

INTEREST IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE BHIKKHUNI ORDER IN SRI LANKA

While making my study of the *Dasasil Mata* Movement in Sri Lanka, my mind was turning constantly towards the importance of the resurrection of the *Bhikkhuni* Order in the country.

A further impetus towards this idea came when the International Sakyadhita Movement decided to hold their annual Conference in

Sri Lanka at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH) in Colombo.

My friend, Mrs Ranjani de Silva was the chief organizer of the Conference, which was to be attended by a large number of Monks, *Bhikkunis,* Buddhist Nuns and lay people from 18 countries all over the world. I stayed with Ranjani at her house in Moratuwa for nearly two years, helping her to organize this event. I remember all the difficulties we had to undergo to organize it and I remember specially the occasion when we approached Ven. Madihe Paññasiha Maha Thero for guidance and advice. He merely told us,

"You may go ahead and do anything, as long as you do not mention the word '*Bhikkhuni*' at any time!"

Anyway, even with many obstacles, the 3rd International Sakyadhita Conference was held from the 25th to 29th of October in 1993, with H.E. the President of Sri Lanka, D.B. Wijetunge as the Chief Guest. Even though it was a "Women and Nuns" conference we were grateful for the presence of supportive and erudite Monks such as Ven. *Bhikkhu* Bodhi and Ven. Kirama Wimalajothi Thero among the others, who gave us much encouragement and support in our efforts. I was proud to be appointed as the President of the Conference while Ranjani was the Secretary.

It was a wonderful occasion with the BMICH Conference Hall full of Monks, Nuns and Lay people, and the recurring theme, strangely, was revolving round the *Bhikkhuni* issue. Many speakers spoke on the same topic,

"Why don't you resurrect your ancient tradition of the Buddhist *Bhikkhuni* Order?"

Wide publicity was given to the Conference and the "Daily News" carried a special two-paged supplement. Today Sakyadhita is a renowned organization, and I have been fortunate in attending nine more Conferences around the world. Since I am a Founder Member, the organizers do not fail to send me air tickets so that I may participate at these events.

Just before my ordination, I met Mr. Gunasena, my physics teacher at Ananda College, after about 40 years. He was so happy to see me and said that he would like to donate his land at Gorakana, Panadura, to put up an *Ashram* for myself after my ordination. Then I told him,

"Thank you so much Sir, but I am just about to leave my home and everything I possess and become a Nun, so I do not need any more land".

But at his insistence, I said that he could donate the land to the Sakyadhita Movement and then my friend Ranjani de Silva, happily accepted this generous offer and with the help of donations received from many countries, constructed the Sakyadhita Headquarters Building, which is now functioning as a residential training centre for *Bhikkhunis* and *Dasasil Matas,* with much success. At this point I would like to remember Mr. Gunasena with a lot of gratitude and admiration for his generosity.

At this time I also used to spend a lot of time at the "Daham Medura" Meditation Centre at Embuldeniya, where Ven. Amathagavesi was conducting Meditation Courses. He was a great teacher, and had a large following of people who were supporting him generously. When he was given some land at Welipara, Battaramulla, I remember I too contributed Rs. 35,000/= from my own savings to construct an *Ashram* there. He also used to conduct a residential Meditation programme for the people of Kandy, at the Pallekele "Gam Udawa" premises, every week. Since thousands of devotees attended this programme, Ven. Amathagavesi asked me whether I could help him to get a permanent Meditation Centre at the Gam Udawa (center for village awakening) site. So I drafted an appeal to the President of Sri Lanka at that time, H.E., Ranasinghe Premadasa, explaining the need for the establishment of a permanent centre for Meditation in Kandy. Mr. Premadasa very graciously granted us the premises and today it is a flourishing Meditation Centre.

Ven. Amathagavesi also constructed the Dekanduwela Meditation Centre and I will never forget with what great difficulty we climbed up the mountain to chant *Pirith* at the top where the centre is situated. We were fascinated by the unusual streaks of lights which appeared out of nowhere in the night skies, which were supposedly emitted by the bodies of divine beings, who had come to listen to the chanting. Later on, this Centre was taken over by Ven. Kiramba Wimalajothi Thero and now it is a very big Nun's Centre where they perform "*Upasampada*" (Higher Ordination) Ceremonies on a regular basis, giving *Bhikkhuni* ordination to

novices. I get such a lot of satisfaction when I see the *Bhikkhuni* Order getting organized and flourishing in this way in my old age. The only sadness is that still it is not recognized by the State, possibly due to the disapproval of some of the Ven. *Bhikkhus*, who still do not want to sanction the setting up of a *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka.

During this time I was spending more and more time staying out of the house, and spending my time at various meditation centres. After leaving my friend, Ranjani de Silva's house, where I stayed for over two years helping with the Sakyadhitha Conference, where she, her husband, Mr. de Silva, daughter Rukmal and Son-in-Law, Anura, looked after me so well, I stayed for another two years at the Meditation Centre belonging to Mrs. Illukkumbura at Ratmalana. I had given up wearing any jewellery or adornments and was wearing only white clothing. This way I lived the life of a recluse, meditating most of the time when I was not going to work, for about five years. By now all the children were married and settled, leading separate lives. I persuaded my second son and his wife to come and stay at our house in Maharagama, so that Asoka too was well looked after. So no one could complain about my being away from home. During this time my great happiness was to conduct a course in Meditation every Sunday, which was well attended by friends, specially Mr.and Mrs. Jayawardene, Chandrani and Jaye, who unfailingly brought lunch for us. Sometimes Mrs. Illukkumbura's children sent us food, but mostly I used to cook just one curry and rice for myself and her, since both of us believed in leading frugal, simple, lives. Sometimes when

there were parties and celebrations at my children's houses, they insisted that I should come for those, promising that they would drop me back to the Meditation Centre, as soon as the event was over! Sometimes they would visit me and bring bags of provisions and presents for me and Mrs. Illukkumbura.

Thus life went on peacefully while I renounced house and home and devoted myself to a path of Meditation and *Dhamma.* Even though I was neither shaven headed nor wearing robes, I actually lived the life of an ascetic practicing the precepts of a Buddhist Nun in contemplation and piety. As I mentioned before, I always did have an inclination towards monastic life. Of course, becoming a "*Bhikkhuni*" never entered my head at this point but studying *Bhikkhuni Vinaya* always made me question,

"Why was the *Bhikkhuni Vinaya* preserved through the ages, if not for the use of a *Bhikkhuni* Order?"

During those days it was rather unthinkable for a woman to leave her hearth and home, since she is the bedrock of the family. Men leaving the household was accepted and when they left the house to become monks, everyone admired them and looked upto them and venerated them. But if a woman did the same, it was a question of,

"She must be frustrated!"

"They must be having family trouble!"

"It must be because no one can get along with her!"

And more to this effect. I must say that I too had a fair share of such comments thrown at me on various occasions! But I thought to myself that if my motives are pure and my objective is to find a way out of this *Samsara,* it did not matter what anyone said, what is important is not to give up my quest for *Nibbana.*

I remember my mother's own sister, my aunt, who became a *Dasasil* Nun at a young age. She was known as Vinanda Dasasil Matha, and when she got ordained her family almost disowned her and her brothers were insulted and refused to support her in any way, even though they were quite wealthy. So she was compelled to lead a very frugal and simple life and she told me that often she would have only a little rice and a Jack seed curry to eat for the whole day. Sometimes if the rice she got for Dana was too much to consume, she would dry the cooked rice in the sun and re-cook it the next day. But she was much loved by the poor villagers among whom she spent her whole life. I used to visit her from time to time. It was my mother who built her a small Ashram and I was happy that I was able to install a deep well pump for her use because otherwise she had to walk for a couple of miles each day to fetch water.

Professor Bloss and I visited her while we were doing our research and I remember how she, then over 80 years old, sat up in bed and spoke to him in perfect English. When she passed away, I went for the funeral along with Professor Bloss, who was quite surprised by the number of funeral orations that were made, and when the funeral organizers called upon a family member to speak a few words, I found that I was the only family member present at the occasion!. So

I spoke up and said,

"I am very proud of my aunt because even though she was so poor in material things, she was so rich in many other ways. In ways that really matter. She was virtuous, pious and led a life a celibacy and asceticism as advocated by Lord Buddha. Maybe some of her rich and powerful relations think that she insulted them by becoming a *Dasasil Matha*. But I think that she is far more rich and greater than all of those misguided people!"

I recall that many people came up to me on that occasion and thanked me for expressing my views so openly. We went in a large procession to the cemetery and her coffin was carried by the village headman and other prominent men in the area, who had earlier made many funeral orations. I have vivid memories of her and sometimes feel that she may have been helping me from a divine abode to achieve my quest in leading an ascetic life and later to become a *Bhikkhuni*.

It was at such a time when the thoughts of an ascetic life and the resurrection of a *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka was occupying my thoughts, that Ilse Ledermann, who later ordained as Ven. Ayya Khema came into my life, giving further impetus to my life long inspiration and goal.

12

THE BHIKKHUNI ORDER

At the first Sakyadhita Conference organized by Ven. Ayya Khema, it was revealed that the *Bhikkhuni* Order is flourishing upto today in some of the countries following the Mahayana Tradition of Buddhism. It was also discussed that their Ordination procedure is the very same as in the Pali Theravada Tradition. When evaluating this trend in the similarity of the two traditions, it came to light that there was a very plausible reason for it to be so.

The only country to receive the *Bhikkhuni* Order from India in 3 BC was Sri Lanka, when Ven. Sanghamitta Theri accompanied by her brother, Arahant Mahinda Maha Thero, ordained the Sri Lankan women as *Bhikkunis*. From that time the *Bhikkhuni* Order flourished in Sri Lanka, with the support of the Queens and lay people. Many women entered the order and were duly looked after and venerated. Since Ven. Sanghmitta and Ven. Mahinda were siblings, the *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis* too were very supportive of each other and treated each other with respect and affection. So the society was resplendent with all four sections of the *Sasana*, namely, *Bhikkhu, Bhikkhuni, Upasaka* and *Upasika*.

Then in 6 BC a group of Sri Lankan *Bhikkhunis* headed by Ven. Devasara Theri, sailed across to China to establish the *Bhikkuni* Order in that country. This is actually a recorded historical fact. It can be surmised therefore, that the *Bhikkhuni* Order given by Sri Lanka to China, had spread across from there to the countries which today follow the Mahayana Tradition. Therefore, we can safely assume that all the *Bhikkhunis* in the world today, irrespective of the traditions they follow, are descendents of the Sri Lankan *Bhikkhuni* Order established by Ven. Sanghamitta. For instance, there are very erudite and respected *Bhikkhuni* Orders flourishing in Korea and Taiwan. But there is no evidence of any *Bhikkhuni* Orders in Burma or Thailand, where obviously the Chinese *Bhikkhuni* Order had not reached at that time.

Therefore, when considering these historical facts, one finds it so difficult to understand the protests and objections towards re-establishing a *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka. Of course one must be fair and admit that the majority of educated and erudite *Bhikkhus* are privately very supportive of a *Bhikkhuni* Order. However, none of them unfortunately comes forward openly to support the cause, possibly for fear of criticism and blame. It is most heartening, therefore, that Ven. Ajan Brahmavanso Maha Thero of Australia has pioneered the establishment of a *Bhikkhuni* Order in Thailand, inspite of being excommunicated by the Thai *Bhikkhus*. As a result, Ven. Brahmavanso has emerged as a world leader, well acclaimed, and rightly so. We would be so fortunate indeed if we had many more of his caliber among the *Bhikkhus* of today.

It was Lord *Buddha's* wish even at the last moment of his passing away into Parinibbana that the four-fold society of *Bhikkhu, Bhikkhuni, Upasaka* and *Upasika* should be well established. It is said that the Mara (Angel of Death) himself came and implored that the Buddha should pass away. However, Lord Buddha replied,

"Oh, Mara, the Evil One, I shall not pass away until my *Bhikkhus, Bhikkhunis, Upasakas* and *Upasikas* are well established in the norm and are able to dispel all wrong views prevalent in the world"

I remember the late Ven. Kirinde Sri Dhammananda Maha Thero, the *Sangha Nayaka* (Chief Monk) of Malaysia, telling the President of Sri Lanka that the *Buddha Sasana* in Sri Lanka is like

a "table with only three legs!" the missing leg being the *Bhikkhuni* Order. The Ven. Thero always used to maintain that the stability of the *Buddha Sasana* depends on the four fold society and he was always a great supporter of the establishment of the *Bhikkhuni Order.*

There is stated historical evidence to show that the golden era of Buddhism in India during the Maurya and Gupta eras was when the *Bhikkhuni* Order was flourishing. Similarly, during the Anuradhapura era in Sri Lanka the development of the *Buddha Sasana* was at its highest when the *Bhikkhuni* Order was well established. It should be noted that the gradual decline of the *Buddha Sasana* occurred with the diminishing of the *Bhikkhuni Sasanas* in these countries.

Therefore, it would be really great if the *Bhikkhuni* Order is given due recognition and state patronage for it to blossom in glory. It is to be hoped that the Advisory Board of erudite and compassionate *Bhikkhus* who give direction and advice to the Ministry of *Buddha Sasana,* would be generous and magnanimous enough to give succour and support to their sisters in *Dhamma* to establish themselves in society as a respected and venerated group.

13

MY ORDINATION

While I was residing at the Meditation Centre belonging to Mrs. Illukkumbura at Ratmalana, I used to visit the Paramadhamma Cetiya Pirivena, one of the foremost Buddhist religious and educational institutes for *Bhikkhus* in Sri Lanka, which was at a walking distance from where I was staying.

The late Ven. Mapalagama Vipulasara Thero was its Chief Incumbent, and after the Sakyadhitha International Conference held in Sri Lanka, many educated and erudite ladies were so interested in the subject of *Bhikkhuni* Ordination that Dr. Hema

Gunatilleke, Ranjani de Silva and I decided to approach Ven. Vipulasara Thero and appeal to him to take up the challenge and initiative to re-establish the *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka.

At that time he was the President of the Mahabodhi Society of India. Also, a big team of *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis* from Korea was residing at his temple studying the English Language. So the Ven. Thero gave us a very kind hearing and told us that it was certainly a timely idea and that he would certainly think on it deeply and let us know how we should proceed further. We were so happy that this Ven. Monk was willing to consider helping us in our quest and subsequently he organized many discussions on this subject with various likeminded persons, such as other *Bhikkhus,* Buddhist Nuns, academics as well as foreign *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis,* where we too were included and finally a consensus was arrived at to seriously consider the re-establishment of the *Bhikkuni* Order in Sri Lanka.

Then arose the actual logistics and statistics of carrying out this mighty task. First and foremost it was decided by everyone concerned that holding the first ordination ceremony in Sri Lanka itself would not be a feasible task since there was still so much of prejudice and objections towards the *Bhikkhuni* Order which was too deep seated to be ignored. So in the alternative, Ven. Vipulasara Thero suggested that the ceremony should be held in Saranath situated in Benares in India, where Lord Buddha preached the first Sermon, the *Dhamma Cakka,* to the five Ascetics and where he, as the President of the Mahabodhi Society of India would be able to organize things without too much fuss. So that was one problem solved.

However, this was easier said than done. The venue in Saranath was to be the building where Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala had his Headquarters many, many years ago. The building itself was over 100 years old and needed extensive repairs. Also board and lodging for the newly ordained *Bhikkhunis* who were to remain in India for two years undergoing intensive training had to be paid for, likewise their air tickets and other sundry expenses. The ceremony too, which was to be held on a very grand scale, with the participation of thousands of people from various countries would incur a huge capital expenditure. So the next problem was to find the necessary funds to carry out this massive programme.

Here too the Ven. Thero rose to the occasion by contacting the *Maha Bhikkhuni* (Chief Incumbent) of the Bo Miyun Sa Temple in Korea, who generously offered to help with the funding and the organization of the Sri Lankan *Bhikkhuni* Ordination project.

Thus slowly but surely the light at the end of the tunnel was emerging much to our delight and happiness. The next step was to select the suitable candidates amongst the *Dasasil Matas* who would like to become the first ordained *Bhikkhunis* in Sri Lanka. So an advertisement was inserted in the newspapers inviting applications for this purpose and approximately 200 applications were received. Then interviews were conducted and finally nine out of the 200 applicants were selected to undergo *Bhikkhuni* Ordination in India. I remember that at the interview many senior *Dasasil Matas* were not selected because many of them could not leave their nunneries at short notice, and some others were not too happy to become a target of persons who were prejudiced against

the *Bhikkhuni* Ordination, when the situation was explained to them properly. Anyway, the nine candidates were chosen and I was requested by the Ven. Thero to initially teach them English for eight months prior to their travel to India.

Then the Korean Maha *Bhikkhuni* wanted some one to come over to Korea to make a study of their Ordination procedure. Since I had by this time completed two extensive studies of our *Dasasil Mata* Movement and *Bhikkhuni Vinaya,* I became the obvious candidate to carry out this task. So when the Ven. Thero asked me to go to Korea and make a study of the Ordination procedure, I did not have much choice but to say "Yes", even though already I had a heavy work load to complete. So within a few days I left for the Bo Miyun Sa Temple in Korea.

When I reached Korea after many hours of traveling, the weather was bitterly cold, no one spoke proper English and the food was totally unfamiliar. At first I was really taken aback, specially when I realized that I had to live and work there for three months. But the inmates of the temple were so kind and generous that after a few days I gradually began to settle down and was quite fascinated by the rites and rituals practiced at the Temple.

The Chief Abbess (*Maha Bhikkhuni*) at the Bo Miyun Sa Temple was a very influential and pious person. The huge Shrine Room located on the third floor had 1000 golden *Buddha* Statues and was really a sight to behold. I also saw the ancient "*Tripitaka Koreana*" carved on wood and preserved carefully as a priceless monument. Every week 100-200 devotees would come for a special morning *Pooja* (ritual), which was really an awesome

ceremony with beautiful chanting of *Suttas* in the Korean language, accompanied by drum beats and ringing of bells which was followed by a two hour sermon by the *Maha Bhikkhuni*. Then everyone was given lunch at the temple and all the devotees paid generously to participate at this *pooja* and to support in the upkeep of the centre. The conduct of each and every person there was so excellent, the discipline was impeccable and their commitment to the temple was absolute. The resident *Bhikkhunis* work hard all day to keep the place spotlessly clean. They sleep on mattresses laid on the ground. There is only one bed in the temple meant for the *Maha Bhikkhuni*. As soon as they get up in the morning, all the bedding is neatly folded and stored in large cupboards and the cleaning ritual begins. It is the task of the *Maha Bhikkhuni* to leave for the market at 5:00 a.m. every day in her double cab and bring about 50-100 kilos of all types of fruit to be used for the daily *Poojas* and meals. The *Bhikkhunis* are all strict vegetarians and lead extremely pious and celibate lives.

The lack of English in Korea was quite a barrier in the study of the Ordination procedure, since nearly all the texts were written in Korean. However, I managed to locate a kind gentleman working at the Embassy and who was a devotee of the Temple and quite fluent in both English and Korean, to help me with this task. So after a few weeks of hard work working with my voluntary "interpreter" I began to make some headway and to my delight I found that the Korean *Dharmagupta Vinaya* tradition of Ordination was practically the same as the Theravada tradition and the procedure was also the same as the one practiced during the days of the

Buddha himself. As mentioned before, it became obvious that the *Bhikkhuni* Ordination which had been taken from Sri Lanka to China and from there to Korea and other countries, had not been tampered with in any way and had retained its original form and purity. So at the end of three months I was able to translate the full *Vinaya* procedure to English and then to Sinhala and later on a copy of it was given to each of the Nuns seeking higher ordination back in Sri Lanka.

While I was thus engaged in my work and when I had nearly completed my task after a grueling three months and was preparing to come back home, I was completely taken aback to receive a telephone call from Ven. Vipulasara Thero, who without any preamble, told me that he was under attack from all quarters regarding the reinstatement of the *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka and that no one was willing to express any support openly for fear of retaliation and that under the circumstances it would be impossible to go ahead with the project!. Words cannot describe my absolute disappointment and sadness when he said that the whole thing must be now abandoned after all our hard work. While I was thinking desperately what I should say and do to remedy this awful situation, the Ven. Monk went on to say that anyway the candidates who were chosen to be the first batch of *Bhikkhunis,* were really not equal to the task because their language skills and communication in English was rather poor and even their knowledge of Buddhism was not adequate to pioneer this historic international event.

At this point I burst out saying,

"Please Ven. Sir, please don't think of abandoning this wonderful thing which we strived so hard for. If you give up now, it will be such a shame and it will never happen again in future. Already 150 Korean *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis* have bought their air tickets and have made all the preparations to go to India for the Ordination Ceremony. So please reconsider your decision and help the whole womanhood in Sri Lanka to achieve liberation."

Then after a minute of complete silence, the Ven. Monk spoke again and to my amazement he said very simply,

"All right. In that case, there is only one solution. As far as I can see, you are the only person who is committed enough and also qualified enough to face this challenge. So if you agree to give leadership to the team of Nuns, I will go ahead with the project!"

For a moment, I was stunned by this totally unexpected suggestion. Then I thought that if I said "No" to this request, I may regret it for the rest of my life. Already I had left home and was living more or less an ascetic life and my family no longer needed me since they were all well settled in life. So what did I have to lose? So I spoke up and told Ven. Vipulasara Thero,

"Ven. Sir, if this is the only alternative, and if you think that I am really suitable, I will gladly undertake this great challenge, even if I have to risk my life in doing so."

Then he simply said,

"That's settled then. I will go ahead with the arrangements. You must now hurry back home and start working towards this goal"

And he hung up without saying anything more.

Then I called home and told my family of my decision to ordain as a *Bhikkhuni*. Since my husband and children were by now quite used to my lifestyle, it was not too much of a shock to them, even though my four sons were not too pleased at the idea. But by and large they were all quite positive and re-iterated that they would support me in every way to fulfill my lifelong ambition of re-establishing the *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka.

But while I was preparing to leave for Sri Lanka, another complication arose. Apparently a large sum of money had been given to Ven. Vipulasara Thero by the Korean *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis* for the purpose of conducting the *Bhikkhuni* Ordination Ceremony in Saranath, India and for some reason they had suddenly become suspicious that Ven. Vipulasara Thero having obtained the money, would abandon the whole Ordination project and misappropriate all the funds. So Ven. Vipulasara Thero was hurriedly summoned to Korea for a top level discussion on this matter. When he arrived in Korea, the Korean *Bhikkhus* and an interpreter, along with Ven. Vipulasara Thero held a discussion for over 2 hours behind locked doors, where the Ven. Monk was properly questioned regarding his good intentions. I was of course quite confident that there would be no problem since I knew how honest and sincere his intentions were towards this project.

So finally everything was resolved positively and I was so happy that Ven. Vipulasara Thero showed his true colours and emerged victorious and the Korean *Bhikkhus* too were delighted that everything came out so well in the discussions. Ven. Vipulasara Thero was indeed a truly illustrious son of the *Buddha*, for whom I have the highest respect and veneration.

So after all these exciting happenings I returned to Sri Lanka, to start on my Samsaric journey towards enlightenment. First I had to ordain as a *Dasa Sil Matha*, prior to higher ordination. I decided that I would like to have this ordination ceremony at the Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara, with Ven. Dr. Kollupitiye Mahinda Sangharakkhita Thero, the Chief Incumbent of the Temple, as my preceptor.

I was greatly surprised to see the massive crowd of family, relations, friends, colleagues and well wishers who thronged the temple from far and wide to witness my ordination on that day. I recall how before the Ordination Ceremony, I offered a sheaf of betel leaves to Asoka and worshipped him, a symbolic gesture seeking his permission to leave the lay life and how immediately after the Ceremony, he in turn duly worshipped me and showed his respects to me in public. There were some tears too shed, specially by my children, particularly by my eldest son Hemabha, but I kept smiling because I knew that I was doing something that was absolutely right for my onward journey and that there simply wasn't any turning back.

There was only a short while more for us to proceed to Saranath for the higher ordination ceremony, so we were all kept busy with the preparations and after a couple of weeks, myself accompanied by the nine other selected *Dasa Sil Matas* proceeded to India for our *Bhikkhuni* Ordination Ceremony, with the blessings of our families and friends and well wishers. Of course, at this point I was also aware of some undercurrents of negative feelings from some quarters questioning as to how I should become the leader of this group and thus become the first *Bhikkhuni* to receive ordination, since my stay as a Novice *Dasasil Mata* was only about 7-10 days, whereas some of the others had long periods of experience as *Dasa Sil Matas* having being ordained for many, many years. But I decided to ignore these things judiciously since I was much more interested and intent on fulfilling my quest of obtaining the *Bhikkhuni* Ordination for the welfare of all womenkind and knew that I would be equal to the task since I was so familiar with the ordination procedures and the *Vinaya* rules, having studied them in detail for many years.

I also consoled myself by thinking back to the days of Lord Buddha, when none of the *Bhikkhunis* of that time led by Ven. Maha Prajapathi Gothami Theri had never undergone any kind of novitiate training or had never been ordained as *Dasa Sil Matas*. Some of them, according to legend, were advanced in years, were married and came from different strata of society and became *Bhikkhunis* straightaway, ordained by Lord *Buddha*. The only qualification they had was the determination to enter the *Buddha Sasana* and end their *Samsaric* journey. So, I thought to myself

that since I too had the same motive and intention, I did qualify to ordain as a *Bhikkuni* myself and my leadership was in accordance with the *Vinaya* rules as practiced in the days of Lord Buddha himself. Also, seniority is counted according to the years of higher ordination as a *Bhikkhuni* and anyway my sole aim and purpose was to follow the Path and also lead others as and when possible, towards the cessation of all troubles and trials of *Samsara.*

The Ordination Ceremony held at Saranath, the very place where Lord *Buddha* preached his first sermon, was unbelievably beautiful. The Mahabodhi Society of India, with Ven. Vipulasara Thero as its President, had made all the arrangements perfectly and everything went like clockwork. We were led in a massive procession, complete with caparisoned elephants, horses, drummers, dancers followed by hundreds of devotees. The Korean *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis* and the Ordaining Masters led the way followed by Monks and Nuns from Sri Lanka and many other countries. Our nuns' contingent was dressed in robes for the Ordination.

Each of the Nuns to be ordained carried a file containing the translation of the *Vinaya* procedure, which I had compiled in Korea. The Ordination Ceremony took 12 hours and was conducted in the Korean language which was translated into English by an interpreter and in turn translated by me into Sinhalese. Since all the nuns had already studied the contents of their files, the procedure went off very smoothly.

The "*Sima*" or the Ordination Platform was constructed beautifully, strictly according to the *Vinaya* rules. Only the Senior *Bhikkus* and *Bhikkhunis* had access to it. The Ceremony was held for 12 hours non-stop, starting at 06:00 a.m. and ending at 06:00 p.m. Before starting we were warned not to drink too much water since it is not allowed for anyone to leave the "*Sima*" even to go to the toilet during this period.

First, we had to stand and worship the *Buddha* with clasped hands on the forehead. Next, we prostrated ourselves on the ground and worshipped with the foreheads touching the ground, which procedure had to be repeated more than 100 times. The balance of the day we were on our knees, body erect. After some time the knees were bleeding, and the pain was excruciating. Yet, the chanting and the rituals went on unabated. But all through this physical discomfort, our happiness and mental satisfaction overrode everything else and we were determined to achieve our objective. The majestic and ancient *Dhammika Cetiya* where the Buddha's relics are enshrined, in the place where Lord Buddha preached the *Dhamma Cakka* Sutta to the five ascetics, appearing in the distance gave us inspiration and courage. After all, it is reported that Maha Prajapati Gotami and her retinue of Sakyan Princesses and other ladies walked 200 miles barefoot to seek Ordination. When they approached Lord *Buddha*, their feet were swollen and bleeding, their yellow robes tattered and they were all shaven headed having cut off their beautiful tresses. Thus it shows with what hardship and difficulty that women achieved their dream of *Bhikkhuni* Ordination, even at the time of the *Buddha*.

Even today I still carry the scars on my knees to remind me of that memorable day!

So the dual ordination took place, first with the *Bhikkhunis* and then with the *Bhikkhus*. Tears came to my eyes when I realized that I had achieved something I must have aspired for, for eons in *Samsara*. To receive ordination as the first *Bhikkhuni* after nearly 1000 years since the disappearance of Sri Lankan *Bhikkhunis*! It was unbelievable! Amazing!! Even today, after 17 years, it remains a beautiful dream come true!

There was a huge crowd of Sri Lankan *Bhikkhus, Dasa Sil Matas* and laypersons from all over the world to witness this occasion. Thousands of photographs were taken as well as miles of Video footage. Later on we got to know that some Sri Lankan newspapers had carried headlines on this event along with many photographs. This had given rise to many arguments and counter arguments both for and against this *Bhikkhuni* Ordination, both in the print and media. We in Saranath were blissfully ignorant of these goings on until we began to receive newspaper cuttings and telephone calls from our families and friends in Sri Lanka. Of course we had nothing to say, since I for one was absolutely sure that all the *Vinaya* requirements were perfectly met at our Ordination and that we had not transgressed any *Vinaya* rules or breached our virtue in any way.

I was also so pleased and amazed too, at the Ordination, when I learnt that some of my schoolmates from Ananda College, Colombo, who were living in the U.K. had chartered a special flight to come and see me being ordained at Saranath! I couldn't

believe my eyes when I saw these old "Anandians", my friends of yore, all gathered there with tears in their eyes! So I told them laughingly that now I am unable to shake their hands, even for old times' sake. But, I am certainly able to shake the hands of their wives! Later I was so privileged and happy to speak to them on the sublime *Dhamma*, standing on stage by the famous Saranath Buddha image depicting the "*Mudra*" (gesture) of preaching the *Dhamma Cakka Sutta*, at the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara. Later my friends also joined us at the daily chanting of the *Dhamma Cakka Sutta*, before leaving for the UK.

Thus we started on the first two years of our newly ordained life at Saranath, worshipping at the sacred shrines, treading the very ground where Lord Buddha and thousands of Arahants had trod for many centuries. We meditated for long hours and chanted the *Dhamma Cakka Sutta* every single day. I think I did not miss this chanting for even one day for the whole of the two years. Once in every two weeks we all gathered together to confess and chant the 311 *Vinaya* Rules, until the Pali Text was learnt by heart and discussed extensively. Our teacher, Ven. Andawela Dewasiri Thero, was an unrelenting master of *Dhamma* and discipline. It is with great humility and reverence that I think of him and I know that we could not have withstood the rigors of North Indian life, food and climate in particular, which was so unfamiliar to all of us, if not for his benign guidance and kindness.

Under Ven. Devasiri's able tutelage, we studied Pali, *Vinaya* and *Dhamma* for two years. We specially learnt the traditions and rituals of the ordained community. He had been the Director of

the Parama Dhamma Cetiya Pirivena for over 25 years and as such he was extremely knowledgeable in all aspects of monkhood and ordained life. Examinations were held regularly and I managed to do well in them since I already had gained a lot of knowledge in most of the subjects even before ordination.

As I mentioned before, we were made to stay in India for two years after the ordination, mainly because Ven. Mapalagama Vipulasara Thero wanted to spare us any adverse effects of the criticism and opposition that might be shown towards the *Bhikkhuni* Ordination in Sri Lanka at that time. This turned out to be a very prudent move because when we returned to Sri Lanka, most of the heat had died down and the whole issue had been discussed and rediscussed so much that it had become very lukewarm. So by and large we were merely ignored and the matter was left alone by the opposing factions.

During our stay in Saranath, one day Ven. *Bhikkhuni* Chueh Min from Taiwan, came to see me and seated on the ground in my kuti, informed me that after this first ordination by Korea at Saranath, a second Sri Lankan *Bhikkhuni* Ordination had been organized at Buddha Gaya in India, sponsored by Taiwan, also a so called "*Mahayana*" country. 22 Sri Lankan Nuns were to be given higher ordination, and the same *Theravada Vinaya* procedure of dual ordination was to be followed. Ven. Chueh Min had actually come to invite me personally to participate at this proposed ordination and insisted that I should attend saying that, since now I am an ordained *Bhikkhuni*, I will have to be inside the "*Sima*" and translate the entire ordination procedure into Sinhalese for the benefit of our Sri Lankan nuns to be ordained because the procedure would

be conducted in the Chinese language and first translated into English and then to Sinhalese.

This too was a massive ceremony, with the participation of many countries and the whole event took about a week and I happily carried out the task allotted to me by translating all the procedures into Sinhalese so that the novice *Bhikkhunis* could understand and repeat the *Vinaya* procedure properly. Later on these newly ordained 22 *Bhikkhunis* were given another ordination at Saranath by Sri Lankan *Bhikkhus* including Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala Thero, with the ten of us as witnesses, at the Mahabodhi Society Hall. Subsequently, these *Bhikkhunis* returned to Sri Lanka and started ordaining other *Dasa Sil Matas* under the patronage of Ven. Sumangala Thero at Dambulla. Although it is a *Vinaya* requirement that a *Bhikkhuni* must have a 12 year seniority to give ordination to another, this rule was waived off by the collective consent of the senior monks. So it is with great happiness that I see the proliferation of the *Bhikkhuni Sasana* in Sri Lanka and rejoice at the role I was able to play in my small way to set the ball rolling, even in the evening of my life.

The statement uttered by Ven. Mahinda Thero in the 3rd Century B.C., when he visited Sri Lanka along with his sister Theri Sanghamitta, to King Devanampiyatissa, has now been vindicated,

"Oh, King, until a person born in the soil of this Island is ordained, Dhamma will not be truly established in Lanka"

The first ten Nuns who were ordained in Saranath and the subsequent 22 Nuns are all "born in the soil of Sri Lanka". This victory was achieved under great stress and trauma after 1000 years. Therefore this *Bhikkhuni* Order should be recognized and nurtured by all concerned persons. Even though the Ordination procedure was not physically held in the soil of Sri Lanka, it should be considered valid and true since all the *Bhikkhunis* are "Persons born in the soil of this island", as stipulated by Ven. Mahinda Thero, who did not specify that the "Ordination should be held in the soil of Lanka"! So the credit of pioneering this great achievement should be given to the first ordained *Bhikkhunis* at Saranath. I state this only because it is necessary to keep the historical record straight and not because of any need for personal glorification or recognition.

I am pleased to say that the *Bhikkhuni* Ordinations are now carried out in Dambulla every three months, and that there are over 1500 ordained *Bhikkhunis* in Sri Lanka today. I too had the privilege of bestowing higher ordination on over 50 *Dasasil Matas*, under the guidance and patronage of Ven. Talalle Dhammananda Nayaka Thero of Tapodanaramaya.

However, the question that always remains in my mind is that after becoming *Bhikkhunis* whether we are actually able to perform our duties adequately, for our own selves and for the world at large. Lord *Buddha* has always extolled the virtue of "*Sangha Samaggi*" – the unity among all Sangha. Therefore, it would be wonderful if all *Bhikkhus, Bhikkhunis, Upasaka*s and *Upasikas* would function

together in unity and harmony, without any kind of discrimination or rejection. Always Lord *Buddha* has commended the four-fold society,

"ayaṁca puggalo paccattimesu janapadesu paccājāto hoti milakkhesu aviññātaresu yattha natthi gati bhikkhunam bhikkhuninam upasakānam upasikānam"

"In the absence of the fourfold society of *Bhikkhus, Bhikkhunis,* Laymen and Laywomen in the practice, those living in far off places will become ignorant of the *Dhamma* and it will be a great tragedy for them, because they will not know the value of generosity, virtue and meditation. The *Dhamma* will not reach the four corners of the earth."

In fact, during the Anuradhapura era, when Sri Lanka was culturally, economically and spiritually advanced as never before and also never after, the presence of the *Bhikkhuni Sangha,* who had performed at the highest level of adequacy is to be noted. Laywomen of that time, who were naturally pious and who were the mainstay of society in terms of supporting the *Buddha sasana,* bringing up children, maintaining hearth and home, etc., found great solace for their many personal problems with the *Bhikkhunis,* whose advice and guidance helped to resolve their conflicts and perform their daily tasks with much happiness and greater energy. This led to the establishment of peace and harmony in society which in turn led to the renaissance of culture, economy and spirituality during that time.

In my many visits to the so called "*Mahayana* Countries" I have always noticed the high level of performance by the large numbers of *Bhikkhunis*, who are a very respected and venerated part of society. They perform at all levels and the countries are extremely prosperous and the people are very pious and religious. As a result the "*Mahayana* Doctrine" is fast spreading all over the world since their four fold society is performing even at international levels in unity and harmony to disseminate the *Dhamma*. Even a cursory glance at "*Mahayana* Countries" such as China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, etc. will serve to prove this point.

On the contrary, in some of the Theravada countries where the *Bhikkhuni Sasana* has been defunct for many centuries, this economic and social development is not seen to such an extent. The four fold society does not exist, and in some countries, other religions flourish while *Buddha Dhamma* has taken a back seat. Therefore, it is the responsibility of all persons in society to nurture and re-establish the four fold society as advocated by Lord Buddha, for the greater good of all beings.

14

MY LIFE AT THE MAHABODHI CENTRE, SARANATH, INDIA

The Mahabodhi Society Centre in India, first established over 100 years ago by Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala, became our home for two years after our Ordination.

The final four months of the two years was a challenge for me because the Chief Incumbent of the Mahabodhi Centre, had to visit the UK and I was appointed as the acting Chief Incumbent by the Members of the Mahabodhi Society. I was on the horns

of a dilemma, because even to sit on the Chief Incumbent's chair, in his office, was quite unthinkable for me since it was first the Anagarika's domain and later that of senior monks! However, I had to overcome my qualms and for the first time in history, as a woman and *Bhikkhuni*, I sat down on the chair albeit with some trepidation!

But soon I realized that I had the support of the entire staff of the centre, who treated me as a venerated mother image and fell at my feet crying, "*Bhikkhuni Mataji*!". They gave me their fullest cooperation and guided me as to what I should do and helped me at every turn.

The workload was quite challenging since there were so many Institutions overseen by the India Mahabodhi Society. Three Public Schools, the 50 roomed Guest House named Birla Mandir, the Mulagandhkuti Vihara, the ancient Dhammika Stupa and the ruins of the "*Migadaya*", the place where the five ascetics listened to the Buddha's first sermon, the *Dhamma Cakka Pavattana Sutta* were all located within the same campus. "Mahabodhi" is the common name for many places of worship in India which were established by the late Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala having sacrificed a large part of his life to wrest control of them from the powerful Hindu *Swami* named "Mahanta". Today, it has become the legacy of Buddhists from all over the world.

Twice a day we walked among these ancient and hallowed places, chanting the *Dhamma Cakka Sutta*. I felt that I must have done a great deal of good *Karma* in my previous births to live in this beautiful place where Lord *Buddha* and the Arahants had dwelled. Sometimes we joined the hundreds of pilgrims arriving from all

corners of the earth to pay homage and perform beautiful rituals at the Mahabodhi Centre. To think that I was the Chief Incumbent responsible for all this even temporarily, was unbelievable, but my spirituality, which knew no bounds, just kept me going forward, undertaking all challenges.

The first obstacle I faced in my day to day duties was the language! All the people, specially the officials at the schools and other places spoke Hindi. But my English was quite well received, specially when interspersed with the few words of Hindi I had already picked up by then. But when I had to speak mostly in Hindi, specially to a crowd of people, I had to write out my speech in Hindi in the English script and then read it out. Fortunately for me there were a few officials who could speak good English too and I could always depend on them for their help.

I particularly remember the celebrations that were held in honor of the Independence Day and the Birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, during my tenure as acting Chief Incumbent, which were attended by a vast crowd of people. Many rituals and cultural items were performed and I had to speak invariably in Hindi and English and even in Sinhalese for the benefit of the hundreds of pilgrims from Sri Lanka who were visiting the Mahabodhi on that day. My talk on the significance of the *Dhamma Cakka Sutta* was recorded by many on that day, and later on I found that many more copies of it had been made and were sold all over in the shops in that area, mainly to attract the multitude of Sinhalese pilgrims visiting the area. It was quite amusing to hear my voice blaring in many shops selling sarees, Indian sweetmeats, and even groceries!

It was the height of Summer, and the temperature rose to nearly 40c°. The daytime heat was almost unbearable. The pilgrims from other countries, including Sri Lanka stopped visiting, but Indian pilgrims started to come in their numbers from various parts of the country, speaking in many different dialects. All of them came to the Mahabodhi Guest House seeking accommodation for a few nights. Not knowing the actual situation of the Guest House, I was blissfully ignorant of the true facts. But to my horror, I suddenly found out that there was no water in the taps and many people were arriving! In a panic, I quickly summoned the Caretaker of the Guest House, who came in quite nonchalantly and told me that the lack of water was due to the non availability of Kerosene oil to work the water pump! It also transpired that there was no money in the bank to purchase the Kerosene or anything else!

So I immediately held an emergency meeting with the Mahabodhi staff and specially the young *Bhikkhu*, Ven. Dhammika Thero, who was always so helpful and managed to purchase the necessary items and got the water pump to work. Soon, the huge overhead tank was full, still not a drop of water was coming through any of the taps in the Guest House. So Ven. Dhammika Thero volunteered to climb upto the roof and look into the water tank to see what was wrong. He looked inside the tank and shouted down that the tank, which was open to the sky, was full of "*Endaru*" (castor) seeds. So we had to clear the tank again, and finally managed to get the taps working without further ado. We also purchased some Asbestos sheets on credit, and covered the tank so that nothing would fall into it anymore.

After this, myself and Dhammika Thero, along with some members of the staff and some of the *Bhikkhunis* in our team, decided to inspect the whole place and check out the state of the Guest house, or the "Birla Mandir". First we went round to the open area at the back, and we were confronted with a row of toilets, that were in an unspeakable state. We forced open one door, and had to jump back from the terrible mess and the stench! Obviously they had not been cleaned for many months!

From there we went into see the rooms. Here we hit a snag because the Caretaker was most reluctant to hand over the keys to the Guest House since he has been in sole charge of this place for the past few years, saying that he would give them over only to the Chief Incumbent, once he returned from the UK. Anyway, in spite of the caretaker's protests, we pushed open one door of a room to find that it contained three men and a woman, in various stages of undress. We were so embarrassed when we realized that the rooms were obviously let out for nefarious purposes while the real pilgrims for whom the place was meant, were turned away on various pretexts. So we went back and held another Meeting, where Ven. Dhammika Thero suggested that I should scold him in public, pretending to hold him responsible for the mess in the place in the absence of the Chief Incumbent, and demand that the keys of Guest House be handed over to me immediately, as the acting Chief! Luckily, our little ruse worked out perfectly and Ven. Dhammika Thero managed to force the keys from the caretaker, pretending to be very worried about my scolding!

Now we were free to look into the rooms! And what rooms they were! We just couldn't imagine how anyone on earth could sleep inside them! The walls and floors were black with dust and accumulated dirt. The sheets and pillow cases had black streaks on them like tar! The whole place was stinking. *Bhikkhuni* Vijitha, *Bhikkhuni* Sudhammika and I collected about 50 pillows after stripping the beds and brought them back to our Dormitory to see what could be done. To our great surprise when we took off one pillow case, we found another just as dirty, underneath! Like this we had to remove about five layers of pillow cases from each pillow! Luckily for us, in the so called "Stores" we found that all that was left over were some pillow cases, probably because they were not sellable! So for the next few days the two *Bhikkhunis* and I were kept busy opening up the pillows and filling up the cotton into new cases and stitching them up. Fortunately Ven. Sudhammika *Bhikkhuni* could use the sewing machine and it was a great help because an old sewing machine was available. Then our garden sweeper, a woman named "Anno" offered to launder the dirty old discarded pillow cases and the sheets. So very thankfully we gave her enough laundry powder and soap and she did a very good job of the laundering.

This poor woman, Anno, had eight children and she was also pregnant with another. One day I visited her house and found that the hearth had not been lit for several days, since they had nothing to cook. Every day she used to come to sweep out the compound for a small stipend, with the children trailing after her. Knowing her plight, it was my daily task to make a big jugful of

"Milk Tea" using the tea leaves, milk powder and sugar that were gifted to me by the pilgrims who used to come and listen to my sermons, and before she started her work, distribute large mugfuls of it to Anno and all her children. This probably was their only "breakfast" and they never missed a day of work, with the result that the compound was always kept very neat and clean, since all the work was done happily and voluntarily!

Thus one by one we cleaned all the rooms. Using a heavy duty hose, we washed the floors and walls and got some of the worst areas painted with what little funds we had. The worst task was to clean and repair the toilets! None of the Hindu laborers would undertake this task because all of them believed that if they cleaned the toilets they would somehow automatically fall into the lowest caste of people in the country, being the "*Shudra* Caste". Having come from a somewhat caste minded country like Sri Lanka, I could understand this sentiment because in India the "Caste System" was much much more prevalent and also somewhat virulent, and the lower castes like the Shudras are really shunned by the higher caste *Brahmins* and so on. So naturally no one would voluntarily fall into such a low caste by cleaning the toilets! So we had to employ laborers of other nationalities, who of course asked for double the pay to carry out the task. We too had to work alongside and provide them with loads of disinfectants and bleaching powder and toilet cleaners and see that the job was done properly. It took a huge amount of time, effort and a large quantity of paint, just to paint the doors and walls, which were black with dirt.

We then cleaned and repaired the kitchen area, which was also in a somewhat dilapidated state, and also bought some new mattresses and bed sheets to supplement the ones that were damaged and unusable.

And finally, we could sit back and heave a sigh of relief because the job was all done, and now our Birla Mandir had become a proper Guest House, at last becoming suitable to be a home for a few days to all the pilgrims arriving from all over the world, as well as the Indian tourists who also started to visit us on a daily basis. It was my pleasure to watch from the upstairs balcony, the bus loads of local people who would pay Rs. 50/= for a night's stay. It was fun to see the women making "*Roti*" in the open air, having bathed and washed their clothes in the newly renovated toilets! Once the hot season was over, the foreign visitors started to trickle in again and they were quite amazed when they stepped into our spotless guest rooms! "We have never seen such neat and clean rooms!" they would exclaim, and most of the time they would pay us double the room rent just to encourage us to maintain the place in the same condition!

By this time, my term of office was nearing its end, and it is with some happiness that I recall that we had managed to collect nearly Rs. 90,000/= for the Mahabodhi Society coffers, before I left my office as acting Chief Incumbent.

Of course, I had to face some criticism too, during this time, specially from some monks who alleged that I was making a lot of money by selling the cassettes on the *Dhamma Cakka Sutta*, that were being copied and sold in the nearby shops. However, since I was not guilty of this offence, this allegation did not bother me.

Another thing I was severely criticized for, was that I was "encouraging bad habits" by feeding the hundreds of destitute children who used to throng the place. This charge of course I could not deny, because it was somewhat true. Sometimes when Sri Lankan and other teams of pilgrims visited the Mahabodhi Centre, they used to invariably cook and offer us *Dana*. These *Danas* were so plentiful and generous that so much of food remained in the alms bowls after we ate, because we were served with too much of food to consume.

So one day, at the end of the meal, Ven.*Bhikkhuni* Chinta and I collected the left over food from all the bowls in a large bucket and went to dispose of it outside so that it did not mess up our kitchen area. All of a sudden we were confronted by some real ragamuffins, who started to say something to us in Hindi, which we did not understand at first. By and by we realized that what they were asking for was the leftover mixed up food that we were going to throw away! While being shocked at this terrible situation, we immediately decided that we would give it away to them. So we got them to wash their hands, tore up some newspapers into squares, and served the food onto them and asked them to eat. This happened every time we had any excess *Dana* food left over and I am proud to say that I am indeed guilty of this offence, while giving much merit to the generous pilgrims who, I am sure, would have been very happy that none of their generous *Danas* ever went to waste!

I was also accused of using tea leaves, milk powder and sugar which belonged to the Mahabodhi Society to make tea for all the poor children and workers who used to come there daily. Here Ven. Dhammika Thero rose up staunchly to support me saying that I used only what was gifted to me and also that I bought milk powder, tea leaves and sugar with my own money too, when we ran short of supplies!

15

SON'S DEATH

After our Ordination at Saranath, we were in India for two years under training as *Bhikkhunis*. During this time, my oldest son, Hemabha, who was 39 years old, married, with two sons, had fallen ill. The Doctors diagnosed it as Colon Cancer only at the last stages, when it was too late. However, I was not informed about it and when I returned home at the end of two years filled with happiness and hope for the future of the *Bhikkhuni Sasana*, my daughter, who met me at the airport, told me that my son was warded at the Asiri Hospital in Colombo and that it would be

better if we went there direct before going home. Even then I didn't realize how bad it was and I was so surprised to see him flat in bed.

For three months, I sat by his bedside and repeated *Pirith* and specially the *Bojjhanga Suttas* over and over again and consoled him by talking *Dhamma*. He confessed that my leaving home and becoming a *Bhikkhuni* was quite hard for him to bear. I was filled with sadness because I thought that he was so well settled in life, a handsome man, 6 ft. tall, well educated with a Post Graduate MBA Degree and many professional Diplomas and a highly paid professional of a Shipping Company, could ever miss me so much and even shed tears when he remembered me. It was so difficult to associate death with him, he was such a dynamic personality. However, with my years of meditation and renunciation I realized with absolute clarity that this is the way with *Kamma*. Where ever you may be, said Lord Buddha, whatever you may do, there is no way that you could avoid paying up the dues of your bad *Kamma*. So I realized that my son was affected by some grievous deed that he had committed in some past life and that like all beings he too had to pay the price. These thoughts of *Dhamma* gave me strength and I managed to bear this terrible affliction with stoic resistance.

Daily his many friends, classmates, colleagues and relations visited him in turn. Specially his classmates at Ananda College were most distressed. He had been the President of the Old Boy's Association of Ananda College, and was much loved by them. They used to talk amongst themselves and also tell us that "Hemabha is so lucky to have a mother in robes, sitting by his bedside and chanting *pirith*. Even death would not be a problem when such a thing happens"

I was also consoled because my son, who had been to the Kanduboda Vipassana Meditation Centre several times, was an advanced meditator who could sit for long hours and even could leave his physical body and have an out of body experience. He had described to me how once at Kanduboda when he was seated cross legged and meditating under a tree, he could feel himself out of his body and up in the air, looking down at his seated body underneath. So for sure I knew that he would have a very good re-birth, once this bad *kamma* is paid for in this life.

Thus the absolute truth of *dhamma* opened up for me more and more when I sat at my dying son's bedside and watched him suffer through his sickness.

"So this is *samsara*. This is nothing peculiar to me and him. Hundreds of other mothers and sons must be undergoing the same suffering even at this very moment all over the world. Such is *kamma* and the price you have to pay when you go on and on in *samsara*. There is only one way to end this and that is what Lord Buddha taught, the way to get out of suffering, the way to *Nibbana*"

Like my daughter Aruni, who passed away long ago, my son too never asked the question, "Why Me?". Knowing only too well the nature of *kamma*, he did not wail or weep or become too emotional. Once in a way he would want to see his two sons, but not very often because I think it must have been too painful since he loved them so much. I remember one day he told me, "Mother, if these children would eat gold, I would get it for them to eat!"

I was chanting "**Iti pi so bhagava...**" at the last moment and never realized that my son had passed away. I only knew when the Doctor came and removed the Oxygen. It was the greatest gift I could have given him because he would have passed away listening to the chanting, and this may lead to him getting a good re-birth. My sadness was overcome with the realization that he will suffer no more with his painful and traumatic cancer. I am sure that every mother would wish that her child would suffer no more and it was this thought that consoled me very much.

In Buddhist Philosophy, there is so much said to come to terms with life and death. "What is Life?", "What is Death?", "Who is a Being?" In the "*Mara Samyutta*" we find Mara (God of Death) asking *Bhikkhuni* Vajira Theri many questions:

"Who created this Being?"
"Where is the creator of this Being?"
"From where does this Being arise?"
"To where does this Being pass away?"

The *Arahant Theri* replies,

"Oh *Mara*, do you think that there is a 'Being'? It is only a false view that you have! This 'Being' is only a result of volition!"

The five aggregates together give the illusion of a "Being". Then it becomes a conventional reality. Just as so many different parts together form a vehicle, so does many parts of the body and mind come together to form a "Being".

According to this misconception, we believe that this is "My son". But in absolute reality, he is only a mass of volition, a mass of five aggregates caught up in the circle of *samsara*. My womb was only a temporary shelter. I did not invite him to come. Neither did I want him to go away. But there was nothing that I could do to prevent him going away or to save his life.

So all this learning became a driving force to impel me more and more towards *Nibbana*. There is nothing in this world I think, as unbearable and acute for a mother, as the loss of her child. From time immemorial in the infinite *samsara*, we have had to face such sorrow. But we never understood the fearfulness of re-birth. The stories of *Patachara* and *Kisa Gothami* came to my mind and my mind surged with the possibility of such enlightenment in this very life.

I also had to control my emotions because I had to console my grieving young daughter-in-law and the two little ones. My daughter-in-law's mother too was inconsolable since my son had been so kind and generous to them too. So she started to cry and lament and at the same time blame her daughter for being unlucky enough to lose her husband and called her a sinner. So I had to intervene and tell her quietly that this is not the way to treat her own daughter who was faced with such a terrible loss and we, as elders, should look after her well being and see that she and her two sons are well cared for, as a tribute to my son. I told her that it was I who had lost a child and not she and therefore she should not be scolding her daughter for being alive! This pacified her effectively and then my daughter-in-law worshipped me and said,

"Thank you, *Amma*". People who heard of his passing away came from far and near to pay their respects and his colleagues and friends had collected a large sum of money for the benefit of his two sons, who were still so young and needed to be looked after.

At this point I also remember another incident about him, when he was employed earlier at the American President Lines (APL - a shipping company). When he passed away, the APL Company made a large donation of money to his two sons saying that it was in appreciation of his gentlemanly behavior, even though he had left the Company many years ago. There was a reason for this. At that time, the American Director of APL had upgraded a junior officer over my son and he was very upset and hurt over this act. I remember he came to me and told me what happened and said that he was so insulted. So I told him,

"Son, maybe that person has done some good *karma* to deserve that position. So it is best that you accept it and go and congratulate him and continue with your own job!"

But he was not convinced and continued to grumble that he had been treated badly by the Company. So I told him that since I am not too well up in these worldly affairs to go and tell his sister and ask her what to do.

So he telephoned his sister and told her what happened. She asked him,

"How many years have you worked there?"

"Four years" he said.

Then she shouted at him over the phone,

"You fool, you idiot, why are you asking me? After having served for so long if they can't appreciate you, you had better find another job. Just give them your resignation!"

But this was easier said than done. How could he give up a job just like that? He had a wife and two kids, a Company maintained car, a very good salary and an unlimited entertainment allowance at all the Five Star Hotels! But he decided that he had been treated unfairly and decided to give up all this and the very next day he went to the office, congratulated the newly appointed junior officer and tendered his resignation! The American Director was shocked beyond words at this gesture, and refused to accept the resignation and told my son that he would give him equal status and a salary to match. But he smilingly declined the offer, thanked the Director and came out. Of course, a couple of weeks later he found the job that he was doing until he died where he was offered a better salary and even more perks, so he was better off anyway.

Though the *Dhamma* gave me much solace, I also found some more consolation in performing many *poojas* and *danas* for his sake, both before and after his passing away. I remember once when he was very sick, someone told me to offer a *Dana* in his name to some pregnant women and give merit to him. After thinking this over, it occurred to me that the best way to do this would be to take some *Dana* to the nearby Government Hospital on the maternity clinic

day, where a lot of poor mothers come for their monthly check ups from far and wide, sometimes even from a very long distance, leaving home around 4:00 a.m. in the early hours of the morning, to be there on time to join the queue to get the numbers to see the doctors. So I prepared 150 packets of rice and curry with fish and eggs, waited near the clinic entrance with the permission of the Hospital staff, and had a wonderful time distributing the lunch to the pregnant and tired women, who were so pleased to receive my home cooked meal that they all gave merit to my sick son. My happiness and pleasure was only marred by the fact that there was not enough food to give to all the mothers who were there that day, who numbered more than 200 souls.

After he passed away, I stayed at my daughter's house for nearly one year, carrying out similar *danas* and *poojas*, until the family were able to cope with their grief and stress. My daughter, Peshala and son-in-law, Ravi, paid all the hospital and medical bills of Hemabha and kept open house so that people could come and express their sadness at the loss of this young man in the prime of his life. Even now I think of all that they did to help the family and always bless them for their kindness and generosity. I wish them both great prosperity and peace of mind and also the bliss of *Nibbana*.

Thereafter, we looked after our widowed daughter-in-law and the two children the best we could, for about four years. She did all her work, now all alone, driving about in her car, maintaining the house, hanging all her wedding photographs in the hall and educating the kids. She used to always wear her wedding ring and

tell me that,

"*Amma,* I never feel lonely because I feel that Hemabha is always there with me!"

Subsequently she got married again with all our blessings and the whole family migrated to Singapore. I am happy that I have been able to visit them every year when I am invited to deliver the K. Sri Dhammananda Memorial Lecture series at the Buddhist Maha Vihara in Malaysia. My older grandson is grown up now and studying at the University of Singapore, and looks just like his late father at that age. My daughter-in-law and her husband, who is just like another son to me, never fail to welcome me saying,

"*Amma,* if not for you, *Thatha* (Asoka) and *Akka* (my daughter), I would have never survived. Thanks to the three of you I am well and happy today and the kids are doing their studies well"

16

MY LIFE AT THE LANKA VIPASSANA CENTRE AT WIJERAMA MAWATHA, COLOMBO 7

After the death of my son, I was so grateful to Ven. Gampaha Premasiri Thero, who was the Chief Incumbent at that time of the Lanka Vipassana Centre in Colombo, who invited me to spend a three month rains retreat at his Centre. At the end of the three months, I was getting ready to leave the place when all the ladies

of the Co-ordinating Society of the Centre came to me and told me not to go and to continue to stay in residence. So I thanked them and told them that I appreciated their invitation very much and agreed to stay on at the Centre whenever I was in Colombo, since I had to travel about a lot because of my worldwide *Dharmadutha* work. Thus I came to live at the Lanka Vipassana Centre for eight long years, after my ordination.

This was indeed quite a busy time for me. I held daily and weekly meditation classes, both in English and Sinhalese mediums to many groups of ladies from the American and British Embassies, groups of doctors, engineers and ladies of other professions, who could only come for evening classes after work, and also gave talks on the *Dhamma* almost every day to the devotees who used to bring us *Dana*. Incidentally, the First Secretary of the American Embassy at that time, Ms. Felicia Holgate became one of my best pupils and even though she was by birth a strong Catholic, she recorded all my talks and was a keen meditator. After her term of office was over, she moved back to the USA and is now living in Portland, Oregon and whenever I visit there, I am hosted by her most lovingly and respectfully.

On every full moon Poya Day, 800-1,000 devotees come to the Centre to observe "*Sil*" and spend the whole day in a retreat. Invariably, I used to give at least an hour's sermon on this day and many of the devotees became my good friends and supporters. I remember Mrs. Kusum Wickremanayake, the wife of the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka and Mrs. Mallika Rajakaruna, the wife of Minister Sarathchandra Rajakaruna, were two ladies who were

most helpful to me in sorting out many matters, and I wish them much happiness and success in all they do.

During this time I also had to spend a lot of time in counseling and advising many women on problems faced by them in their day to day lives. Many came with tales of woe, having lots of trouble with their husbands, children, in-laws and parents. So I had to chat with them personally, tell them how to tackle problems in the *Dhamma* way and show them the benefits of *Sila* and Meditation in their daily lives.

I remember one specialist lady Doctor who wanted to leave her home and profession and get ordained. But I dissuaded her from taking such a drastic step all at once and told her to wait until her children were settled in life and not to give up her job until she could retire and get her pension. So she gave up her idea of ordaining, helped her children with their studies and even today is studying and meditating and looking forward to becoming ordained at some future date. Many of my pupils joined the Post Graduate Institute of Buddhist and Pali Studies, some of them becoming star pupils earning Merit Passes and Gold medals. They are all so loyal to me and always say,

"*Bhikkhuni*, what you taught us has opened new vistas in our lives. This *Dhamma* is a wonderful new world to us and we can't thank you enough for showing us the way"

Some of them are now able to educate their own colleagues and juniors in *Dhamma* and meditation. There is a great need for such educated *Dhamma* teachers both here and abroad. I feel

so disheartened that these erudite women are not recognized and given a due place in society. If only the Bhikkhuni Order is given due recognition as in the times of the Buddha and there are adequate training centres meant for the Bhikkhunis, I am sure that most of these women would happily join the Order and be of great service to the society as a whole. As it is their services are not utilized properly for the benefit of the upcoming generations since they do not have a proper support system to perform their duties adequately.

Dhamma is something that must be practiced in daily living, especially to enter the Noble Eightfold Path. One needs to practice *satipatthana,* which is a meditative process of contemplation which leads to *Nibbana.* Educated teachers are needed to guide and give necessary instructions for anyone to tread this path. It is said that there were 70 crores of lay people who attained different stages of sainthood in Savatthi town alone during the time of the *Buddha.* Even though Lord *Buddha* is not here, this is not an impossible goal to achieve, even partially today, since his Dhamma still exists in the world.

Teaching the *Dhamma* needs skill and perfect knowledge, it is said. The *Buddha* told that giving the gift of the *Dhamma* is the greatest gift, better than giving *Dana* to the *Sangha,* better than building Stupas and monasteries or doing any similar acts. People give *Dana* having heard the *Dhamma.* If they have not heard the *Dhamma* and practiced it, they will not give anyone even a spoonful of rice, because they do not know why or how to make merit. Therefore a good *Dhamma* teacher is a great blessing.

"sabba dānam dhamma dānam jināti"

"The gift of the *Dhamma* excels over all other gifts" said the Buddha.

Most of the social and domestic problems can be resolved by educated and erudite *Dhamma* teachers.Specially the Bhikkhunis and Nuns would get the opportunity to listen to the day to day problems of women. As I said before, many come to me with personal problems and most of the time I have been able to help them by counseling them according to the *Dhamma*. As told by the *Buddha, Dhamma* must be realized in this life itself and not postponed to the next life after death.

During the days of the *Buddha*, a Monk who had gained the 3rd Stage of Sainthood *(Anagami)*, told the *Buddha* that he would like to be re-born in the *Brahma* world before completing the final stage and becoming an *Arahant*. Then Lord Buddha said,

"No. Even a little dirt is still dirt. Do not think of getting re-born. You must gain the final stage of sainthood here and now. Do not postpone it"

From this we can understand how very important it is to follow the *Dhamma* in this world itself, here and now. The *Buddha* said that it is extremely fearful if someone gets a sub-human rebirth, because one would have to undergo endless suffering as hell beings, animals, hungry ghosts, etc. So it is of utmost importance to make the best use of the valuable human births we have got through great *kusala kamma*.

It is said that in Sri Lanka, during the Anuradhpura era, people worked all day in the paddy fields and in the evenings after dinner, they all went to the temple and listened to *Dhamma* till midnight. That was the golden era of Sri Lanka, when the country was so peaceful and prosperous and it gained the name "The Granary of the East". Nearly all of our magnificent cultural heritage, now in ruins, belongs to this era. Leading a righteous *Dhamma* life is more important than ever now, considering the massive degeneration in both spiritual and personal lives of people today. The modern world has become a trap, with terrible environmental pollution, weapons of mass destruction, drugs and intoxicants making human beings totally lose their bearings, not knowing which way to turn. So this is why we have to tread the Buddha's Path and also show others the way, since it is the only salvation we may have to escape the trials and tribulations we face in day to day living.

This is why we need many, many teachers of *Dhamma*. Science and Technology certainly cannot give all the answers to the multifarious problems of the world. We have to turn to the *Dhamma* for a spiritual reawakening and must make use of our human re-birth to help to make this world a better, more people friendly place for the benefit of all beings.

17

MISSIONARY WORK ABROAD

Very soon I began to receive many invitations from other countries to give *Dhamma* discourses and conduct meditation retreats to groups of people. They sponsored my air tickets and hosted me in various places, where my programmes were prearranged. As a result, I was able to meet and become friends with hundreds of educated and erudite people who became faithful devotees from around the world.

I remember I visited Germany many times and stayed at the *Buddha* Haus. Gerhard and Ellen Link from Germany hosted me grandly many times and they are still my very good friends. In fact, Gerhard was the Chief Guest at the opening Ceremony of my Meditation Centre, which is named after my beloved mentor and friend, Ven. *Bhikkhuni* Ayya Khema from Germany. Another friend and teacher, Dr. Friedgard Lottermoser (Now Ven. *Samaneri* Akincana) also hosted me in Germany and has become my dear friend who visits me every year at the Ayya Khema Centre. Another country I visited quite often is Taiwan where I stayed at the Fo Guan Shan Monastery of Master Hsing Yun and their International co-ordinator, Ven. Chueh Men is my great friend. I also took batches of ten precept Nuns from Sri Lanka to this Monastery to get *Bhikkhuni* Ordination and receive training in monastic life.

The Korean *Maha Bhikkhuni,* Ven. Sang Wong is another friend who was so kind and generous to me every time I visited Korea and stayed at her Bo Myun Sa temple.

I also have been visiting Malaysia almost every year at the invitation of the *Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana* Society of the Buddhist Maha Vihara, the temple headed by the most venerable Kirinde Sri Dhammananda Maha Thero, a Sri Lankan Bhikkhu, who was the *Sangha Nayaka* (Chief Monk) of Malaysia and my very respected and dear friend and mentor. After he passed away now the Chief Monk is Ven. K.Dhammarathana Nayaka Thero. I am so privileged to stay at this vast and beautiful Monastery for 1-2 months each year conducting various programmes such as

the Temporary Ordination of lay people, doing the annual K. Sri Dhammananda Memorial Lecture Series, co-ordinating the yearly Sanghamitta Day Celebrations, etc. I have made many faithful friends in Malaysia such as Sisters Rupa and Nancy, Premaseri, Yanna and the most helpful and friendly office staff and of course Balamma the Cook, just to name a few amongst a multitude of kind and generous people. I must mention here that I feel that the Buddhist Maha Vihara has become almost my second home! In fact I am writing this part of the book while sitting in my comfortable room at the Buddhist Maha Vihara in Kuala Lumpur.

India too became like another home because we lived there for two years and I visited various parts of the country many more times both on pilgrimages and other missionary work.

I have visited the USA about three times conducting lecture tours and giving meditation instructions, usually traveling from the West Coast to the East Coast. Sometimes about 100 devotees attend my *Dhamma* talks and my air tickets and board and lodgings are meticulously arranged so that I am never inconvenienced, even when traveling great distances and carrying out a strenuous programme of work. The main organizer of my programmes in the USA is Prof. Saliya de Silva, my dear nephew and his wife, Sudam, who spare no pains to make my stay as comfortable as possible. I think of them with a great deal of Metta and bless them always. Sometimes the talks were conducted in temples, Universities, private homes and even Churches. There were no ethnic or religious or any other barriers in attending the lectures, so people of many nationalities and religions attended the talks. Of course

this only shows the universality of the *Buddha Dhamma*, which speaks only absolute truths about the true nature of life and living, which is common to all beings, irrespective of who and what they are. I too feel greatly rewarded by these *Dhamma* activities and I am so grateful to all the organizers for all the time and trouble taken to give the gift of the *Dhamma* to humanity. May they gain much merit and attain *Nibbana*.

In the USA I was invited to visit the Temple of Ven. Walpola Piyananda Thero, my most respected and revered mentor, in Los Angeles. I am ever grateful to him for coming all the way from the USA to witness my *Upasampada* ordination in Saranath, India in 1996. I remember how, after the ceremony he presented me with a soft, pure cotton robe and said that he acknowleged and accepted my ordination as a *Bhikkhuni*. Another great and erudite Monk who said the same was Ven. Dr. Dodangoda Revatha Thero, President of the India Mahabodhi Society. Infact, I had the good fortune to meet both these monks recently at the Buddhist Maha Vihara in Malaysia and it was a great opportunity to speak to them.

Another place in the USA, where I gave many talks was at the "Bodhi Monastery" in New Jersey, on the kind invitation of Ven. *Bhikkhu* Bodhi. When inviting me, he quietly told me not to speak on any formal topics like the "Four Noble Truths" or "The Noble Eightfold Path", but just to recount my personal experiences with the *Buddha Dhamma*. Accordingly, I accepted and when I went there, I found that it was his own "*Dhamma* Day" and there was a large audience, with Ven. *Bhikkhu* Bodhi and Ven. *Bhikkhu* Analayo seated in the front row! For once, I felt quite nervous because I

hardly knew what to say with such erudite and world reknowned scholars seated in front of me!. But I told myself that since I was going to speak *Dhamma,* I could not go wrong! Anyway at the end of the talk, I was so delighted because Ven. Analayo stood up and said,

"That was one of the best talks I have heard for some time!"

Later on Ven. *Bhikkhu Bodhi* told me,

"You said exactly what I wanted to hear from you!"

We had a wonderful time together at the Ashram and I thought of the days of the *Buddha,* when the *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis* were as brothers and sisters, helping and complimenting each other and having an enjoyable time.

I also spent some time at the *Bhavana* Society in New Jersey, where Ven. Dr. Henepola Gunaratne Thero is the Chief Incumbent. Here I had the opportunity to speak to the Yogis in residence. It was such a wonderful experience. Once Ven. Gunaratne Thero asked me to accompany him on his daily walk in the shrub jungle nearby. So I told him,

"Ven sir, I am too old for that. I will be crawling so slowly behind you that I will get lost in the jungle because you will be soon out of sight!"

So he laughed and went on his walk. Such wonderful monks makes me think of the days of the *Buddha*!

I gave many talks also at the New York Buddhist Vihara, on the invitation of the Chief Incumbent, Ven. Dr. Kurunegoda Piyatissa Thero, mostly on Vesak and Poson Full Moon Poya days to large gatherings of English speaking audiences. I really enjoyed the "Question and Answer Sessions" and discussions with the audience participation.

Another country I visited many times is Australia. I remember my first visit there at the invitation of my dear friends, Dr. Seneviratne Banda and his wife, Rupa. I had met them earlier in India while I was living there after my ordination. They attended a sermon given by me at Buddha Gaya, under the sacred Bodhi tree. After the sermon they came and spoke to me and we became friends. I know that they went into great trouble and expense to organize my trip to Australia. In fact, Rupa was working so hard to arrange my programme day and night that even in her sleep, she was talking about "*Bhikkhuni*!" and Dr. Banda had to wake her up and tell her,

"For heaven's sake, Rupa, can't you stop talking about *Bhikkhuni* even when you sleep?"

Later, other friends like Vinitha Jayasinghe and many others too arranged programmes for me in Australia. I was so lucky to visit Perth and Ven. Ajahn Brahmavamso graciously invited me to conduct his own retreat day. So I conducted the retreat on his behalf and one of the talks was recorded on internet. Some months later, back in Sri Lanka, a working scientist from Houston, USA, named Dr. Golden visited me at my Ashram and said that he

had listened to my talk in Perth over the internet, and was so pleased. Then he gave me a donation of Rs. 20,000/= asked me some more *Dhamma* questions and went away. At this moment, I remember Ven. Ajahn Brahmavamso when he visited Sri Lanka sometime ago. I managed to see him just for one moment, since he was so busy and surrounded by thousands of devotees. Anyway, I asked him,

"Ven. Sir, is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, *Bhikkhuni*" He replied promptly.

"What is it, Ven. Sir?"

"You must become an *Arahant*!" He said.

All my talks in Australia were dutifully recorded by Dr. Banda who used to follow me around armed with a camcorder. Later Rupa took a lot of trouble to transcribe the document and type it into the computer and publish the talks. This book, which was named "Living in Peace I" is popular even today. In addition, my talks held in three other countries, namely, UK, New Zealand and Bahrain too have been published as "Living in Peace" "II", "III" and "IV". Once again it was a great privilege for me to visit all these countries and speak the *Dhamma* to educated and interested audiences and I am so thankful to all the organizers, who are too many to mention here individually by name. May they all be blessed again and again for their efforts towards the propagation of the *Buddha Dhamma*.

In UK I am usually hosted by one of my pupils of yore, Gamini Jayaweera, who studied science almost 50 years ago in my class at the Practising School, Maharagama. Now a very successful citizen of the UK, Gamini, his wife Sujatha and their two children have

become very dear to me. I have visited UK about five or six times and their house is a home away from home for me. Gamini and Sujatha have driven thousands of miles taking me to many retreats in his luxurious BMW car all over UK and I bless them again and again for everything they do for me even today. May they attain the supreme bliss of Nibbana for their meritorious acts.

In UK I had the opportunity of speaking at the London Buddhist Vihara, when Ven. Dr. Medagama Vajiranana Thero was the Chief Incumbent and who was known to me back in Sri Lanka, since both of us were members of the weekly "Buddhist Forum" of the Sri Lanka Brodcasting Corporation. This talk was held on a Wesak Full Moon Poya day, and a large number of devotees including the Sri Lankan High Commissioner at that time attended the programme. I felt so honoured when Ven. Vajirañana Thero introduced me to the audience and paid me a glorious tribute before asking me to conduct the lecture. After this the Ven. Thero passed away and his place was taken over by the present incumbent, Ven. Seelavimala Thero, who is also extremely kind and generous to me, every time I visit his temple in the UK. The Amarawathi Temple in UK is also a place where I have been invited many times and I have had some very interesting and educative discussions with the *Bhikkhunis* resident there.

Another important event that I am invited to on a yearly basis is the Elijah Interfaith Conference, which is held in a different country each year. This is a noteworthy Conference where many religious leaders of diffrent faiths including the most reverend

Dalai Lama participates, to share views upon interfaith harmony and world peace and other related topics. I too have to read a paper on the Buddhist viewpoint on the subject under discussion. It is a most interesting and rewarding experience to share all the different ideas with other religious leaders. When this Conference was held one year in Israel, I was fortunate to visit the tomb of Jesus Christ and walk on the same path that Jesus himself walked, carrying the cross. I remember that my eyes were streaming with tears when I touched the floor where Jesus fell. I chanted the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* and shared merit with divine beings there. I personally believe that Jesus is a living God full of loving kindness and compassion and who is able to help all those who pray to him for worldly help and succour.

In fact, I have just returned home from the 2012 Elijah Interfaith Conference which was held in U.K. this year. After the Conference I was invited by my kind friend, Margret Kaufmann who had organized one week of meditational retreats in the Netherlands and Belgium, where I had a lovely time conducting many courses and making many friends in *Dhamma*.

I also attend the meetings of the World Sangha Council of which I am a member. These meetings too are held in different countries and the next one is scheduled to be held in Indonesia.

Once I attended a State sponsored Conference on Religion in China. I was the only *Bhikkhuni* among 20 *Bhikkhus* from Sri Lanka who participated and I was privileged to address the Conference. I remember I spoke on the Four Noble Truths and

it was well received. I must say that I have never participated at such a magnificent Conference anywhere else in the world. The roads were decorated with Buddhist Flags for hundreds of miles and we were driven about in luxury coaches for sight seeing after the Conference. We were feted for fully seven days and every minute of the day was meticulously planned. There were many cultural shows and dancing, singing and other performances by professional artistes. Thousands of school children lined the roads, waving flags as the buses carrying the delegates from various parts of the world rolled by. The food was an array of Chinese dishes. Luckily, we had requested vegetarian food, otherwise it would have been very difficult to choose from the numerous dishes of various colors, shapes and textures!

The Chinese are mostly Mahayana Buddhists, who idolize the *Bodhisattas*. The statue of the *Bodhisatta* on top of a mountain, towers sky high standing on a huge lotus placed in a large pond surrounded by statues of elephants, watering the lotus with the water pouring from their trunks! It was truly a wonderous sight! I am quite sure that there are divine beings who are helping these people, when you think of their achievements, the immaculately clean countryside, soft, mellow sounds of chanting, and the overall feeling of happiness and comfort.

According to my Passport, I see that I have been traveling from 1996 till today to many countries in the world, in addition to my "world tour" in 1969, gifted by the National Science Foundation of USA. I thought that I should record this fact for posterity.

1996 - India
1997 - Thailand, Cambodia
1998 - India
1999 - Germany
2000 - Singapore,Nepal, India, China
2001 - Korea
2002 - China, Germany, Burma
2003 - Australia, Germany
2004 - USA, Korea, Canada, Malaysia
2005 - China, Malaysia, UK, Taiwan
2006 - Malaysia, Taiwan
2007 - UK, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Germany
2008 - UK, Malaysia, India, Canada
2009 - UK, Canada, Israel, Malaysia
2010 - Malaysia, USA
2011 - USA, Sarawak, Malaysia
2012 - UK, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Dubai

When I think of my life as a *Bhikkhuni*, I feel so happy and content. Sixteen years ago when I left my hearth and home, I thought that I may very well be on the road, with no one to care for me. But giving up my home and family has been so amazing! Today, I have children and families all over the world, who provide me with the best of comforts, best rooms to stay in their homes and gourmet food! I am homeless, but I have homes everywhere! I don't possess a vehicle, but I have many luxurious vehicles to travel the world including free air tickets! I don't have any personal

wealth, but I am rich enough to build a Meditation Centre with 15 rooms in Sri Lanka! I thought that I am too old now to work once I retired from my profession, but here I am, conducting lectures and meditation sessions around the world! So giving up house and home has been a luxury for me in every way!

On rare occasions, I do get to spend some quality time with my own children and grandchildren, some whom also live abroad. They too take care of me in every way. So I have the best of both worlds! Of course in my mind I do realize that all this is not due to "Me". It is all due to the exalted *Dhamma*. I feel very humble when I reflect upon renunciation – *"nekkhamma"*. It is such a rewarding experience, even though it has its own challenges and difficulties, specially in old age. Now that I am old and rather feeble, I cannot any longer travel by bus as I used to do. So I am dependent upon others for my transport. I am so lucky that all my dear Doctor friends are always available to attend to my little illnesses and aches and pains due to old age. But I occupy myself by being very grateful to all my benefactors and try to spend the day with loving thoughts of *Metta, Karuna, Mudita* and *Upekkha* towards all of them and endeavour to live in the present moment without worrying about the past or the future.

As a laywoman, I was very much in the habit of giving *Dana* to the *Maha Sangha*. Now as a member of the *Sangha* myself, I receive gifts from lay people which at the start was a little strange but I have got used to it gradually. These gifts helped me a great

deal to set up the Ayya Khema Meditation Centre. However, this centre is located about 30 Kms. from the Capital City of Colombo. Since much of the official infrastructure in Sri Lanka is established in Colombo, sometimes it is a little difficult to operate from the Centre on a day to day basis mainly because of the distance and lack of transport facilities. So my next project is to establish a "Hostel for Women and Nuns" in the city of Colombo, so that laywomen and nuns who need a safe, comfortable place to stay in Colombo at a minimal cost for a few days can get accommodation on a temporary basis to complete their work in Colombo. I am happy to say that already the project is on its way. Of course much of the work is yet to be completed, but I am hoping that with everyone's help I would be lucky enough to see its completion during my lifetime.

18

THE AYYA KHEMA MEDITATION CENTRE AT OLABODUWA

After our ordination at Saranath, India, we returned home to Sri Lanka subsequent to two years of training. At this juncture, I found that I had no place to reside, since I did not have an Ashram of my own. So Ven. Vipulasara Thero kindly invited me to come and reside at the Paramadhamma Cetiya Pirivena, where a separate two storied section was set aside for the newly ordained *Bhikkhunis*. At this time the Ven. Thero himself was badly ill and was more or less confined to his bed. One day he called me

and asked whether I could teach English and Buddhism to the 50 young *Samanera* (Novice) Monks, who were studying at the Paramadhamma Cetiya Pirivena. Since I was so used to teaching young undergraduate Monks at the Sri Jayawardenepura University for many years, I was delighted to accept this assignment.

Accordingly, we had a few days of teaching, discussions, question and answer sessions and then to my great surprise, all of a sudden the young Monks refused to attend the study sessions. On inquiring, I was so saddened and disheartened to hear that some of the Monks had objections to learning from a "*Bhikkhuni*" and these few dissenting Monks had persuaded all their colleagues too, to boycott the classes. This episode really demoralized and upset me because, during my lay life I had taught hundreds of young monks and I was one of their favourite teachers at the University. But just because I had joined their ranks as a *Bhikkhuni*, now they reject me as a teacher and colleague! This left me with a very bad taste in the mouth so much so that I determined to leave the premises and somehow find a place of my own to live.

At this point, Ven. Vijitha *Bhikkhuni*, who was ordained with me at Saranath, very kindly invited me to come and stay with her at her little ashram at a place called Olaboduwa about 30 kms away from the City of Colombo, which had been gifted to her by one of her well wishers. I agreed promptly and thanked her for her kind offer and immediately set off with her.

While residing at Olaboduwa, I got to know that a small block of land of about 10 perches adjoining the Ashram was up for sale. I was thinking to myself that this would be a nice place for me to

have a small meditation centre of my own. However, at this point of time I did not have any money to purchase the land. Then for my good fortune, I was invited by some friends to conduct a *Dhamma* and meditation retreat in Germany under their sponsorship. In those countries, unlike in Sri Lanka, they give small cash gifts as "*Pirikara*" (alms) when they participate at such programmes. The small amount of foreign exchange, when converted into Sri Lankan rupees, became a big enough sum to purchase the block of land at Olaboduwa. This is how the "Ayya Kema Meditation Centre" was born.

After this, I continued to receive many invitations to travel and conduct programmes in various countries and I managed to collect enough money to construct a 5 roomed Ashram in my block of land. I also helped Ven. Vijitha *Bhikkhuni* to repair and renovate her "Gothami Ashram" while I stayed there. Once my Ayya Khema Ashram was completed I moved in, all alone. However, I did not feel lonely since Ven. Vijitha was next doors and there was another family also living in the adjoining compound, who used to come in and out all the time, helping me with cooking, cleaning and looking after the premises.

After some time, Mr. Gerhard Link and his wife Ellen and their son from Germany, visited me at Olaboduwa. Gerhard was the President of the *Buddha* Haus Ashram in Germany, which was built by my dear friend Ven. Ayya Khema, after whom I named my own centre, since it was she who really inspired me to tread this path. When they visited my place they found out that there was yet another block of land adjoining my land, in extent of about 1.5

acres which was for sale. Gerhard went to my wall and took one look over at it and said,

"*Bhikkhuni*, you must get this land too!"

I smiled and said nothing because it would have been an impossible dream for me, since the price was unaffordable. After some time, Gerhard called me from Germany and told me that he had spoken to all his friends at Buddha Haus and had raised enough money to purchase the block of land for me! I was speechless with surprise and gratitude and accepted his most generous gift with many blessings.

From then on, all the money I received for my *Dharmadutha* work abroad in many countries was spent in expanding the Ayya Khema Centre over many years. Ven. Vijitha *Bhikkhuni* too now has a large temple, where the villagers come on a daily basis to participate at many rites and rituals such as *Pirith* chanting, *Bodhi Poojas, Danas,* etc. I have preferred to keep my place in quiet seclusion, mainly for meditation and contemplation. At the beginning I went on *Pindapatha* (alms rounds) in the village and the villagers were pleased to give me *dana*. Later on, my pupil and the other nuns who come and stay here from time to time, too continued to go on alms rounds. Now that I am too old to do so, we do some cooking at the Ashram too, for our daily meals.

While I was building the centre, as usual there were many rumours flying round, to say that I was building a house for my daughter, etc. However, once the Stupa was constructed and the pinnacle laying was done at the opening ceremony by me and Madam Kusum

Wickremanayake (The wife of the Prime Minister and my long time friend and supporter), going up together to the sky in a "back hoe loader", all the rumours died a natural death! Here I must mention that the beautiful Topaz (a precious gem stone) at the tip of the pinnacle was a gift from my dear friend, Nancy, from Malaysia. People from about 10 countries participated at the opening ceremony with Gerhard Link from Germany, as the Chief Guest.

So the Ayya Khema Meditation Centre stands tall today, a legacy built for my many daughters and sons in the *Dhamma,* around the world. It is a gift of spiritual wealth for posterity, for developing the seven precious treasures to achieve *Nibbana,* as told by the supreme Lord *Buddha.*

"Saddha dhanaṃ, sila dhanaṃ, hiri ottappiyam dhanaṃ, suta dhanañca cāgoca, paññā me saptamaṃ dhanaṃ"

"Confidence in the Dhamma, virtue, moral shame and fear to sin, listening to and learning the Dhamma, generosity and wisdom are the seven treasures"

The aim and purpose of the Ayya Khema Centre is to gain *Nibbana* now, not in the next life nor later on in *samsara.* At least to open the doorway to the Path, so that one could never turn back into the hell worlds and suffering.

Living thus in isolation in a rather remote village was not so easy at first. But I managed to do so quite well, no doubt due to my practice of *Dhamma* and meditation. To maintain nearly two acres of land was also a task. It was so expensive to install retaining walls

around the property but it had to be done, due to security and other reasons. Some huge trees that were sending in roots to the wells and toilet pits had to be cut down and removed. However, I always managed to find enough labour from the neighbourhood. Luckily, my young pupil nun, *Bhikkhuni* Medhavini, did most of the work and we also hired labourers to cultivate the land, with coconut trees, fruit trees, vegetables, jak trees, cinnamon trees, etc. Now it is a beautiful place, serene and quiet, with a few nuns in residence and it is my pleasure to spend as much time there as possible, enjoying myself and being one with nature. My only hope and wish that before long maybe an Arahant Nun would be in residence at the Ayya Khema Centre. Then my dream will come true!

Today the Ayya Khema Centre is open to all who wish to make a long or short retreat in peace and quiet. Overlooking a large expanse of paddy fields and a forest of huge perennial rubber trees in the distance, cool breezes sweep the place, taking away the heat of the midday sun. Already we have accommodation facilities for about 15 people. Simple vegetarian meals are offered twice a day, most of it provided from our own garden, especially the vegetables and fruits, which are organically grown.

19

HOSTEL FOR BHIKKHUNIS AND WOMEN & THE COMMUNITY KITCHEN PROJECT AT SADAHAM SEVANA, COLOMBO.

A fact that I had been always aware of is that there is no proper, secure place for *Bhikkhunis, Dasasil Matas* or lay women to spend a few days in the Capital City of Colombo. Specially for foreign

Bhikkhunis and lay women who need to be in Colombo to get their Visas extended, contact their Embassies and various other official purposes and also the local *Bhikkhunis* and women who need to visit Colombo fairly often, it is not possible for them to find suitable accommodation in the city unless they have the capacity to spend a lot of money and find paid accommodation, which is very expensive.

With this idea foremost in my mind, establishing a "Hostel in Colombo for *Bhikkhunis* and women in *Dhamma*" is another ambitious project that I found myself focusing on recently. In fact, the seed for this idea was planted when I was fortunate enough to meet Ven. Athuraliye Rathana Thero, who really helped and supported me when I needed to stay in Colombo, by offering me accommodation at his vast and beautiful monastery situated in the Colombo City. He is a Member of Parliament too, elected to office and also an Advisor to the President of Sri Lanka. Ven. Rathana Thero had been gifted with four acres of low lying land in Borella, Colombo: 8 (which was formerly the dumping grounds of the Colombo Municipal Council), by the Government, to set up an international research and training centre for Buddhism in the country. Already some buildings have come up in the land and regular training programmes are held for Bhikkhus chosen from temples islandwide in diverse areas such as Buddhist Philosophy, Meditation (with practical sessions held at the Kanduboda Vipassana Meditation Centre), Pali, Sanskrit and English languages, Community/Social service, environmental conservation, science and technology, etc., which are being conducted by special lecturers and resource persons from these fields.

One day while staying at this centre, I was observing these young monks from various parts of the island who come and stay there for a few weeks to undergo this training, which I felt was so useful for them to render yeoman service to the remote areas where some of them came from, and I felt a deep sadness that our *Bhikkhunis* and *Dasasil Matas* have no chance of doing so. Whilst thinking thus, I came upon Ven. Rathana Thero and asked him almost jokingly,

"Ven. Sir, it is a joy to see all these young *Bhikkhus* learning and studying so hard. Don't you think that our sisters in *Dhamma* too need such learning and education too? After all, they too are a part of the Sangha society"

Then the Ven. Thero, who in any case is a strong supporter of the idea of setting up a *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka, smiled and replied,

"Of course, *Bhikkhuni*. What a wonderful idea! In fact, I think we should start thinking about it right now, since you are staying here too. After all we have all this expanse of land, which really belongs to the *Buddha Sasana* and therefore, we will dedicate this place to all four sections of the Buddhist society, namely, *Bhikkhu, Bhikkhuni, Upasaka* and *Upasika*!."

This brought tears of joy to my eyes, since I knew that Ven. Rathana Thero meant this with all his heart. While being a devout and pious son of the Buddha, I feel that he is also my own samsaric son, who is here to fulfil my dream of seeing the *Bhikkhuni Sasana* flourishing in this land.

So from that time on, this has become another dream project to conquer and when I visited the USA last time, I was so lucky to receive a most generous donation to start on this plan. Ven. Rathana Thero has very kindly allocated a part of the land for this purpose and already the building is being constructed. On completion, we hope to accommodate about thirty persons at a time. My only wish and hope is that it will become a wonderful place of learning and retreat for all our *Dhamma* Sisters around the world. I am ever grateful to Ven. Rathana Thero who like in the times of the *Buddha*, supports the "catuparisa" or the Four Fold Society, who lived in close proximity and was a powerful support to the propagation of the *Buddha Dhamma* during that time.

In fact, another idea too is being considered alongside the Hostel Project. That is, to set up a "Community Kitchen" to supply all who come to the "Sadaham Sevana International Buddhist Reserch Centre", with a simple meal at a very nominal cost (and sometimes even free, depending on the need). Already the cooking stoves, kitchen areas etc are planned out and while I know that all this boils down into having adequate Rupees and cents, it is my hope that somehow we will raise all the funds needed for this purpose too, so that no one ever goes hungry at the Sadaham Sevana Buddhist Centre!.

20

MY LIFE TODAY

Now in my 83rd year, I find that I am happiest in living at the Ayya Khema Centre in quiet retreat. I have many visitors both from here and abroad and we have regular Dhamma retreats and meditation sessions. Our neighbours are always at hand to help with the cooking, cleaning and maintenance of the place. I really enjoy the twice a day ritual of *Buddha Vandana* (Worshipping *Buddha*). The rest of my time is spent in meditation and giving *Dhamma* discourses to various groups of devotees and friends who visit the Ayya Khema Centre. Every once in 2-3 weeks I travel to Colombo to conduct various programmes on invitation.

My foreign travels too are not yet over. Every time I leave the country now, I think,

"Ah, this will be the last time. I am sure I will die off this time!"

However since this has not yet come to pass, probably I will continue my work to propagate the *Dhamma* until my very last day! When I am in Colombo, my daughter and my many doctor friends see to my good health and comfort and look after my failing health.

My pupil nun, Ven. *Bhikkhuni* Medhavini is a source of great happiness to me. However, she is only 22 years of age and is at the moment following a Study Course in Buddhism and Pali for a Degree at Pallekele, Kandy. Once she completes this residential course, she will be here permanently. Being a very keen meditator and with her higher education, I feel that she will be able to rise up to the responsibility of carrying on the work at the Ayya Khema Centre, even in my absence in future.

On my 81st Birthday, Ven. Medhavini presented me with a beautiful bouquet of flowers saying,

"With this sweet smelling, beautiful bunch of "*Kusum*" ("flowers" in Sinhalese), I venerate you, *Bhikkhuni* Kusuma.This is a pooja for the *Dhamma* you teach me and the virtues you display. May you live long, raining *Dhamma* on the parched, dry hearts of human beings around the world. Dear Teacher, even though there is so much water in the oceans, I will die of thirst if I do not have a drop of fresh water to drink. Even though there are millions of

stars in the sky, the world would be a terrible place if the sun and moon are missing. Even though there are billions of people in the world, if you, my teacher, is not there, my world would be empty, dark, useless and scary. You are the drop of fresh water to quench my thirst. You are the sun and moon which light up my world. So may you live long and may you be well and happy and attain *Nibbana*"

Today I am a grandmother of 12 grandchildren who live in various parts of the world. Occasionally when I meet them, their biggest request is,

"Please *Sadhu Aththamme* (Grandmother), tell us a *Jathaka* Story"

So happily I narrate the beautiful stories of Lord Buddha's *samsaric* journey, and when I see them listening wide eyed with wonder, I suddenly remember how I myself as a kid, used to listen to the same stories repeated by my own grandmother so very long ago. Then once again I realize the impermanence, the transient nature of things in life. Things long gone, people long dead, childhoods long past, never to be recalled again.

My daughter and the fourth son live in Sri Lanka. Whenever I go to Colombo, I stay a few days at my daughter's place, where I enjoy some home comforts and my daughter generally resolves my worldly problems. My youngest twin sons live respectively in Canada and Dubai. I get to visit them occasionally during my travels.

My ex-husband, Asoka, is now in his 86th year and lives at our house at Mahamegha Gardens with his two widowed sisters and a nephew. After retirement from his post as a Director of Education, being such a brilliant Mathematics teacher, he still coaches students in Maths for Advanced Level examinations. Also he is very much involved in the practice of the *Dhamma* and is a very good meditator and gives many *Dhamma* talks at various temples, over the radio and the TV. I am happy for him because he has advanced so much in his meditation and come such a long way in *Dhamma*. When I married him 55 years ago, he belonged to an English speaking, sophisticated family background. His father, Mr. D.A. Devendra too was a well known teacher, and was the Principal of many Central Schools in many parts of the country. So it is indeed an achievement that he can now give Dhamma discourses fluently in both Sinhalese and English media and do long hours of meditation.

Asoka is also very involved in many social welfare projects and recently as the President of the Maharagama Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), he pioneered the setting up of a 60 bed Hospice near the Maharagama Cancer Hospital for the benefit of the cancer patients who have to come for chemotherapy and radiation treatment from all over Sri Lanka. This hospice provides free accommodation and meals to all the patients and their caregivers who reside there temporarily until their course of treatment is over.

21

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I must mention that this is not intended to be a work of scholarship. This is a simple narrative to provide, if at all, some guidance and inspiration to women who seek an alternative life style away from hearth and home.

The nature of life and living in the universe, alas, changes continually and will eventually disintegrate and disappear, causing much frustration and disappointment. This is the true nature of the "*Dharma*" of the universe. *(Swabhava dharma)*.

The ever changing body, mind and the environment, make it impossible for us to obtain a never ending supply of only good things to enjoy. Thus the mind becomes consumed by things that can and cannot be obtained, and this leads to craving and dissatisfaction. The supreme *Buddha* saw this process which holds true for the past, present and the future for all living beings.

If death is the end to everything, then there will be an end to all this misery. But no! Then there is re-birth. It is only the final saint, the *Arahant*, who can rest assured, since he will not be re-born. But all others have to expect re-birth in any one of the many spheres of existence. Hence the need to do acts of good *kamma* to acquire merit to ensure a decent re-birth, away from hell worlds and similar places.

Following was the advice of all *Buddhas*,

"Sabbapāpassa akaranaṃ – kusalassa upasampadā
Sacittapariyodapanam – etaṃ Buddhāna sasanam"

"Refraining from all evil – doing only good
Purifying the mind – this is the message of all *Buddhas*"

In accordance with the words of the *Buddha*, his disciples followed the Middle Path, refraining from all excesses of self indulgence and self mortification and thus gained satisfaction in a spiritual life. The ordained community had an easier task to practice, having given up the responsibilities, trials and tribulations of lay life. Thus arose the *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis* who strived hard and attained states of Sainthood and put an end to their *samsaric* sojourn.

This is why it is so important to keep the issue of the *Bhikkhuni sasana* alive in the world and specially in Theravada countries. I only hope that this will be a wake up call for the Theravada countries of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and also Tibet. Their clarion call should be,

"Lead us not by tradition, but by the original *Buddha* word!"

My heartfelt prayer is that the *Bhikkhuni Sasana* in Sri Lanka will not be forgotten and dissipated in the many years to come, even though I may not be alive to see it flourish. Practising *Bhikkhunis* can leave such a valuable legacy to inspire the future generations. If this Path is shut down or untrodden, it will be lost forever, much to the detriment of all.

"To you, the beloved Pilgrim in *Samsara,*
Setting out alone on your pilgrimage,
Go with the *Buddha,* keeping the Path open
In peace and harmony.
Have no fear,
Only faith in your mission towards liberation.
For a person commited to gain *Nibbana,*
Worldly problems are not major concerns"

"**Sukhi hotu sabbadā!**"

"May all beings be well and happy!"

22

AFTERWORD

The Vidyodaya-Sri Jayawardenepura University days and after – My friendship with Ven. Dr. Bhikkhuni Kusuma, then Mrs. Kusuma Devendra.

It was in 1973 when Mrs. Kusuma Devendra and I first met at our interview to be recruited as Instructors in English to the Sub Department of English of the Vidyodaya Campus.

It was a mutual liking at the first encounter and the friendship that followed after our recruitment has not abated all through these

years, even after her ordination as a Buddhist Nun in 1996. Even though her worldly status has changed, our friendship is still as warm as before and her affectionate nature has not changed in any way; infact, I feel that she is even more loving now. After visiting her recently at her Ashram, with a close friend and my husband, I remarked to them while returning home that our *Bhikkhuni* is still so warm and unaffected despite all her learning and recognition as a Buddhist nun. She just has no airs about her, doesn't stand on ceremony and is totally natural and delightful.

So when she mentioned that her autobiography was being written, I said that I too would like to contribute something to it, a suggestion she was happy to accept.

In 1973 when I met her, Mrs. Devendra was a beautiful and dignified lady, as she still is, even though all her lovely, wavy hair is shorn off! She was my closest friend at the University and we shared many ideas on teaching English as a second language to adult students. Soon our friendship had extended to our families, our children too growing firm friends. She always recalls with mirth, how my family visited her right at the "*Nekath*" (auspicious time) time on the Sinhalese New Year Day, to share in the celebrations.

Life went on merrily at the University, often with long closures for one reason or another, giving Mrs. Devendra enough space to pursue her Buddhist studies almost uninterrupted. She thus completed her MA in Buddhism, writing her Thesis on *Sati* (Mindfulness in Buddhism).

However, towards the end of this time, a great tragedy struck her and I too was devastated by it. Her third child, Aruni, studying at the Science Faculty of our University, was suddenly struck down by cancer. Aruni was a bright, light hearted girl, excelling not only academically, but also in sports, being a champion Table Tennis player. Her illness disturbed me no end as I simply couldn't understand how a good, kind hearted girl like Aruni could be so stricken. But she never complained or questioned her affliction. I don't think I have ever seen courage such as hers before or since. As her illness progressed, she had to stop her academic activities. (I think the University was closed at that time anyway). However, when the new batch of students arrived to take part in a brand new English programme, Aruni was keen to be a part of it. So I outlined the proposed programme to her where all the new students would gather in the large hall and sing English songs of great meaning together with us. So the words of the songs were typed and distributed to all and Aruni volunteered to lead the singing from the stage while I sat down with the students, singing along with them. It was truly an unforgettable experience, testified to by many students years later.

After this Aruni's condition worsened and she was confined to bed. I used to visit her often and have delightful chats with her. She took it so lightly, her illness, laughing and joking about everything. It was she who took away my own distress and never a word of sadness passed between us. Soon after, she passed away in her sleep – death having no sting. She lived lightly and looked death in the face with equanimity. Mrs. Devendra took the passing

away of Aruni in her stride, but grieve she did. It was my privilege to lend her a sympathetic ear, talking about Aruni for hours on end till the pain for both of us eased somewhat.

More and more Mrs. Devendra was turning to Buddhism and soon decided to do a PhD on the subject. So she retired from work without applying for an extension of service, and plunged into her studies. Though she was no longer a member of our staff, she was almost a permanent fixture at the University Library, poring over tomes for her doctoral thesis. She used to be away often too, doing field work for her research, and so missed the worst tragedy to strike our University in the late 1980s, when the second JVP insurrection was at its height and our Campus was a hub of its activities. I however witnessed much devastation during that period and pray that such a time will never return.

Meanwhile all her children were grown up and getting married one by one and leaving the parental nest. Mrs. Devendra was drawn increasingly in to a life of contemplation and was preaching *Dhamma,* whenever she was invited to do so. She used to come and give *Dhamma* discourses to my students at the Medical Faculty of the University. She was more and more involved in meditation now, leaving home for extended periods of time.

Finally, she took the difficult decision to leave home permanently and ordain, and with the permission of her husband and family, was ordained as a *Dasa Sil Mata* in 1996, at the Kelaniya Raja Maha Temple. I was there to personally witness the ceremony, along with a large gathering of family and friends. Some of my students were there as well and I overheard one of them saying,

"If you want the husband to worship his wife, then she must get ordained!"

These students took many photographs to make a splendid photo-record of the event in an album, which they gifted to her when she departed shortly to Saranath, India, to get her higher ordination as a fully fledged *Bhikkhuni*.

In 1998 she lost her eldest son, Hemabha, who was married and having two young sons. *Bhikkhuni* Kusuma took the blow with her characteristic equanimity. Hemabha was a quiet, unobstrusive man, a gentleman to his fingertips. I had the privilege of praying for him as he lay grievously ill with cancer at the hospital. He appreciated my prayers so much. Sometime later he passed away, having seen a vision of a place of great light and happiness, as he bade farewell to his wife.

Today *Bhikkhuni* Kusuma has made great strides in her new life as an ordained nun, having visited America, Canada, Europe, Australia, Korea, Taiwan, Middle East and India, preaching and teaching. She is a much sought after speaker among the Sri Lankan expatriates and the local people of these countries. Despite all this traveling and a very busy schedule in Sri Lanka, she has managed to build an international Buddhist Meditation Centre in Olaboduwa, a tranquil hamlet close to the main town of Horana, about 30 kms. from Colombo. This centre has residential facilities for a dozen or so meditators. So she has proved herself to be not only a contemplative of great stature but also an immensely practical one, having built this centre and administering its day to day running.

Also, she is still the great hospitable lady she always was and had cooked lunch for us herself, when we visited her recently. It delighted my heart to hear that all the visitors who come to the centre once a month on a Saturday for meditation and *Dhamma* discussions are treated to breakfast, lunch and tea, all at her expense.

And yet for all her achievements, *Bhikkhuni* Kusuma is still the same warm and loving lady I first knew long ago as as my friend, Kusuma Devendra.

Oranee Jansz BSc (Hons),
Sri Jayawardenepura University.

June 2012

23

INDEX I

Publications

Translations

1. Biography of Ven. Dr. Mun Bhuridatta Thero
2. Sakyadhita – Daughters of the Buddha
3. Ven. K. Sri. Dhammananda's publications – 06 Volumes
4. Ven. Hsing Yung's publications - 10 Volumes
5. Humanistic Buddhism – How I practice it.
6. Leading a Good Life

Publications

1. Living in Peace I (Discourses in UK)
2. Living in Peace II (Discourses in Australia)
3. Living in Peace III (Discourses in New Zealand)
4. Living in Peace IV (Discourses in Bahrain)
5. The Dasasil Nun
6. Bhikkhuni Vinaya
7. Sati – Mindfulness in Buddhist Meditation
8. Bhikkhuni Vinaya (Sinhalese)

Also have contributed many articles to the Internet, Websites, Magazines, Newspapers and to many national and international Conferences and Forums such as the World Sangha Council, Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, Sakyadhita Conference, etc.

24

INDEX II

Appreciations

Apart from all the people mentioned in this publication, I feel that it will be very remiss of me if I do not express my gratitude and thanks to many, many other friends and family who have supported and helped me throughout my life and still play a very big role in my day to day existence. Without all of them and also some of the others who are too numerous even to mention here, it would never have been possible to achieve all that I have achieved. Therefore, I thought I must at least mention a few of these

wonderful people who always stand by me both in prosperity and adversity just to say "Thank You" and say, "I appreciate and love all of you. May great merit and happiness be yours".

Sri Lanka

Dr. Aruna Kulatunga
Dr. Kanishka Karunaratne
Dr. Devakanthi Gunaratne
Dr. Pem Gunaratne
Dr. Shanthamali de Silva
Dr. Geethanjali Senanayake
Dr. Lakshman Senanayake
Dr. Manori Senanayake
Dr. Srima Gunasinghe
Dr. Ganga Sirimanne
Dr. Indrani Kulatunga
Dr. Samadhi Rajapakse
Dr. Nalindra Jayatilleke
Prof. Indrani Munasinghe
Dr. Nandrani Karunaratne
Dr. Nimmi Wickremasinghe Madugalle
Dr. Manel Lakdivdas
Mr. & Mrs.Rajah & Shantha Karunanayake
Mr. & Mrs.Eric & Punsara Perera
Mr. & Mrs.Kaveendra and Manel Perera
Mr. & Mrs Karunatilleke, son Ajitha, daughter Vayomi
Siri & Kusum Perera, son Asoka, daughter Champi

Mrs. Manel Van der Poorten, daughter Dr. Vivimarie, son-in-law Lal Medawattegedera

Mr. & Mrs. Kamal Wijeratne, son Jayantha, daughter Nilanthi

Mr. & Mrs. Sunil and Dilrukshi Weeraratne

Mr.& Mrs. Rajah Kuruppu

Mr. & Mrs. Gamini Meemaduma

Mrs. Jayawathi Amarasinghe

Mr. Palitha Liyanage

Mrs. Wimala Somaratne

Mr. & Mrs. Nihal and Indra de Silva

Mr. & Mrs. Dinesh and Sriyanthi Muthuthantri

Mrs. Beeta Koswatte

Dr. Kamalini Vijithananda Upasika

Mrs. Ranjani de Silva, daughter Rukmal, son in law, Anura Ranasinghe

Mr. & Mrs. Indradasa Hettiarachchi

Mrs. Samanmali Rupasinghe

Prof. Oliver Abeynaike

Prof. Ariyapala Perera

Mr. & Mrs. Buddhi Wickramasekera

Ms. Nisansala Karunaratne

Mr. & Mrs. Nayana Hewakapuge

Mr. Indika Samarasinghe

Mrs. Zaitune Amirally

Mrs. Mangala Fletcher and son, Amila

Mrs. Manel and Ven. Welimada Khema

Mr. & Mrs. E.D. Premasiri

Mr.Wijesinghe and Mrs. Rani Wijesinghe
Bhikkhuni Vijitha Nanda, Gorakana Sakyadhita Meditation Centre
Bhikkhuni Gothami, Prajapati Bhavana Centre, Meegoda
Bhikkhuni Vijitha, Gotami Ashramaya, Olaboduwa
Bhikkhuni Dharmashanthi. Dekanduwela
Bhikkhuni Khemachari, Kegalle
Bhikkhuni Uttari, Kataragama
Dr. & Dr.(Mrs) Asoka & Chitra Weerakkody

America

Prof. Saliya and Prof (Mrs.) Sudam de Silva, children Sahani & Surani
Mr. Soma & Mrs. Ramani
Bhante Walpola Piyananda Thero (Sanghanayaka of America)
Ven. Pandith Kurunegoda Piyatissa Thero, New York Buddhst Vihara
Prof. Nirmala Salgado
Dr. Lasika & Dr.(Mrs). Chandrika Seneviratne
Bhikkhuni Sudharma
Prof. Ravi Kulasekera, Dr.(Mrs.) Kumudu and daughter Dinushi
Mr. Steve & Mrs. Felicia Holgate
Prof Anura & Prof. (Mrs.) Nishantha Goonewardene
Mrs. Therese Duchesne
Mr. Mike & Mrs. Bindi and daughter Nelum
Mr. & Mrs. Suriyakumar

Ms. Princy Munaweera
Ven. Ayya Gunasari Bhikkhuni
Ven. Ayya Deepa Bhikkhuni
Prof. Ananda & Mrs. Swarna Wickramaratne
Prof. Srini and Prof. (Mrs). Renuka de Mel
Dr. Mahendra & Dr. (Mrs) Champa Dassanayake
Dr. Harsha & Dr. (Mrs) Prasani Jayatilleke
Mr. Parakrama & Mrs. Deepthi Weerappuli
Ms. Susan Pembroke
Dr. Dharshani Kumarasena
Dr. Padmajeeva Ganepola

United Kingdom

Mr. Gamini and Mrs. Sujatha Jayaweera, daughter Hiranthi, son Gehan
Dr. Padmini de Silva
Dr. Geetha Fonseka
Mr. & Mrs. Surangani Amaratunga
Mr. Jayantha & Mrs. Padma de Silva
Dr. Nanda & Mrs. Swarna de Silva
Dr. Senarath & Mrs. Indrani Perera
Mr. Jayantha & Mrs. Indra Silva
Prof. Muni Goonewardene
Dr. Henry & Dr. (Mrs). Jayamini Gunaratne
Ms. Buddhi Chetiyawardene
Mr. Michael & Dr. Tasneem Perry
Ven. Bhikkhunis of the Amarawati Temple
Ven. Dr. Sumanasiri

Australia

Dr. Seneviratne Banda & Mrs. Rupa Seneviratne
Mr. Banduala & Mrs. Vineetha Jayasinghe
Mrs. Celia Liyanage
Mr. Ari & Mrs. Sriya Ariyaratne
Mrs. Mallika Rankothge
Dr. Sanath & Mrs. Kanthi Tissera
Dr. Nina Davidson
Mrs. Thalatha Karunaratne
Mr. Guptila de Silva
Prof. Jayantha Genegoda & Mrs. Deepa
Ms. Dinesh Keeper
Mrs Shiromi Fernando
Mr. Hemantha & Mrs. Neranjana Devendra and children
Dr. Anura & Mrs. Jayanthi Jayawardene

New Zealand

Mr. Sirisena Abeysinghe
Mrs. Chitra Karunaratne
Dr. & Mrs. Chula Rajapakse
Dr. Bishan Rajapakse
Dr. Asoka Dias, Mrs. Nalini Dias and children, Randula & Chanaka
Mr. Rohana & Mrs. Lalitha de Silva
Dr. Priya Wickremasinghe

The Netheralnds

Mr. & Mrs. Brian and Margret Kaufmann
Ven. Devamitta Thero
Mr. & Mrs. Salinda and Corianne Goonewardene and children

Canada

Mrs. Soma Gunatilleke
Ms. Ravindri Kulatunga
Prof. Nimal & Mrs. Udula Ratnayake
Mr. Nihal & Dr. Subhadra Kappagoda
Mrs. Thilaka de Soysa
Mr. & Mrs. Chulani Jinadasa
Ms. Krishni and Ms. Dishni Weeraratne
Mrs. Indra Madanayake

Germany

Mr. Gerhard and Mrs. Ellen Link and son, Benedict
Ven. Bhikkhu Nyanabodhi and members of the Buddha Haus
Mrs. Gabrielle Kustermann
Mr. & Mrs. Sonnadara

Malaysia

Sisters Katherine, Rupa, Nancy, Margaret and family members
Ven. Sri Dhammarathana Nayaka Thero

Ben. B. Saranankara Nayaka Thero
Ven. Dhammika Chang
Mrs Ruby Song & Mrs. Mary Song
Ms. Lee Soo Hua
Ms. Anatta & Ms. Medha
Mr. Yap Leong Ping
O Swee Weng
Dato Frankie
Ms. Mint Leong
Ms. Julie Tan
Mrs. Aggie Pieris
Mrs. Karuna Simon
Mr. So Ah Tee
Mr. Tilak Leslie Jayawardene
Mr. Premaseri
Ms. Alice Tan
Mr. & Mrs. Khoo Boo Eam
Ven. Shih Ling
Mr. Song Kim
Mrs. Rosalin Tea

Singapore

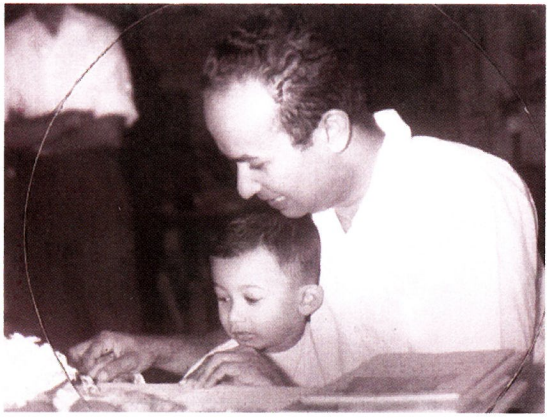
Mr. Bennet & Mrs Kusum Manukularatne
Ven. Nyanaseeha Thero
Ven. K. Gunaratne Thero
Mr. Haresh & Mrs. Harini

25

INDEX III

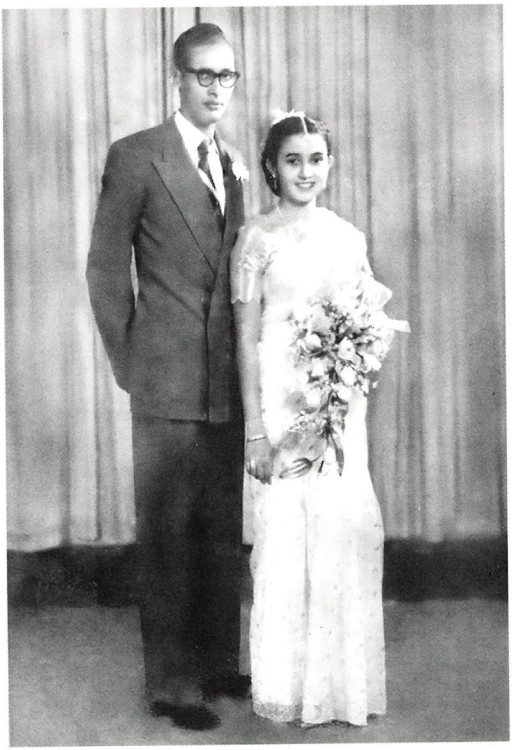
Photographs

Father & Mother



Brother, Somachandra Goonewardene
& his son

With Asoka's Family



Our Wedding
10th May 1956

Experiments on Molecular Biology in the Laboratory
at the Ball State University, Indiana, USA

Poojas in memory of late daughter, Aruni.

Mr. Dharmasena Ariyatilleke (Lay Preacher) giving a Dhamma talk at the Mahamegaramaya Temple
(Subsequently Ordained as Ven. Harispattuwe Ariyawansalankara Thero)

Practising Meditation from 1970 onwords

Trips with Family & friends
at Polhena Beach, Matara

Postgraduate Degree
Awards Ceremony

Daughter's Wedding

As Chairperson of the Sakyadhita International Conference held in Sri Lanka October 1993

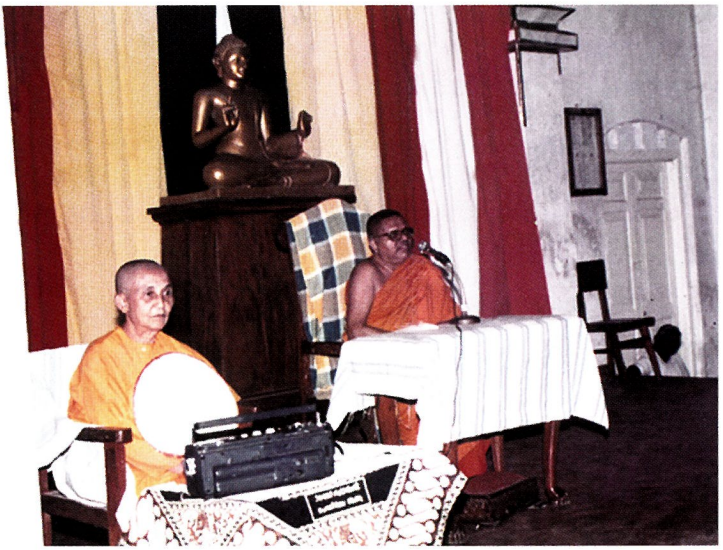
Meeting the Queen of Ladakh, when visiting the country to participate at a Conference

Venerating the 1000 golden Buddha statues at the Bo Miyunsa Temple in Seoul, Korea

Dasasil Mata Ordination
Ven. Potuhera Dhammapali cutting my hair at the
Kelaniya Raja Maha Temple

Dasasil Mata Ordination with Ven. Dr. Mahinda
Sangharakkhita Thero, Chief Incumbent, Kelaniya Temple

Asoka paying his respects after
the Dasasil Mata Ordination



First sermon as a Dasasil Nun - Ven, Mapalagama
Vipulasara Thero presiding at the Paramadhamma Cetiya
Pirivena, Ratmalana

After the Upasampada (Higher Ordination) Ceremony with the Ven. Bhikkhus who participated, at Isipathana, Benares, India

With the Chief incumbent of Isipathanaramaya in Benares, Ven. Sri Sumedha Thero

As the Acting Chief of the Mahabodhi Society
Behares, India

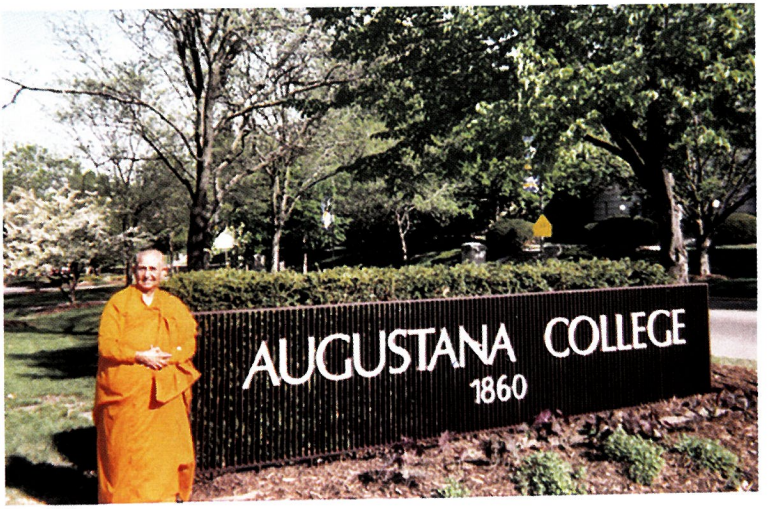
Presiding over the Celebrations held in honour of
the 134th Birth Anniversary of Ven. Dharmapala,
Benares, india

Ordination of a Singaporean Lady at Bodhagaya

With H.E., Mangala Munasinghe, High Commissioner for Sri Lanka in India & Mrs. Munasinghe, Saranath. 8th June 1997

Paying homage to Ven. Vipulasara Thero after the Higher Ordination

Venerating Lord Buddha at the Kansas City Temple, U.S.A.

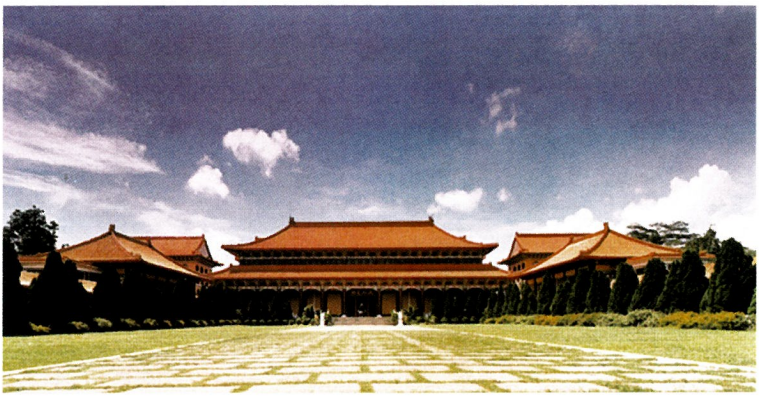


While conducting a Lecture Series on Buddhism at the Augustana University College, U.S.A.

In front of the Cetiya where the Ashes of
Ven. Dr. Kirinde Sri Dhammananda Thera are interred Buddhist Maha Vihara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Conducting the Temporary Ordination Ceremony at the Buddhist Maha Vihara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

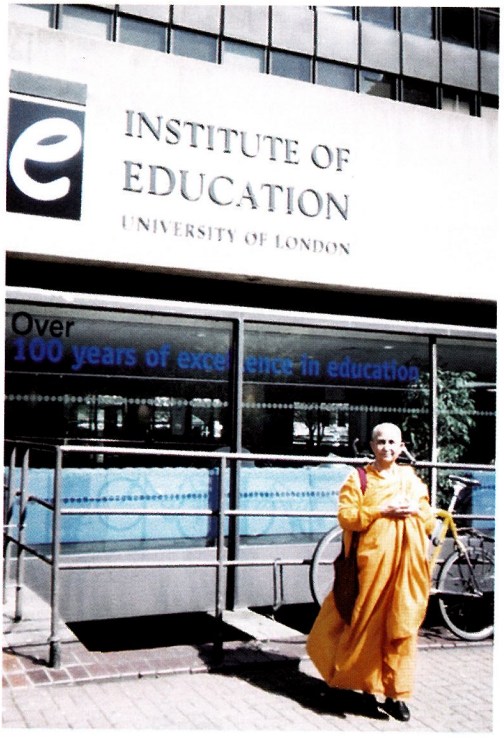
At the Temple in Penang, Malaysia



The FO Guan Shan Temple in Taiwan. I had the privilege of acting as interpreter at the Higher Ordination Ceremony held here for 20 Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis. 800 Bhikkhunis and 400 Bhikkhus are resident at this Temple. The Dining room can accomodate upto 4,000 persons at a time

In the U.S.A.

Discussions with the Bhikkhunis at the Amarawati Temple in U.K.



After delivering a Dhamma talk to the staff Members of the Institute of Education, University of London, U.K.

Ven. Ayya Khema, my Guru & Mentor

My dear friend and Guru, Prof. Friedgard Lottermoser, Later ordained as Ven. Samaneri Akincana

Visiting the Sri Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth) in Kandy with Ven. Bhikkhuni Wan Song, the Chief Abbess of the Bo Myun Sa Temple, Seoul, Korea

The Bhikkhuni Upasampada Ceremony held at Tapodanaramaya, Mt. Lavinia, Sri Lanka

A Dhamma Sermon for the soldiers at the Palali Camp in Jaffna, June 2009

Ven. Aturaliye Rathana Thero chairing a Conference.

Opening Ceremony Olaboduwa Meditation Centre with Mr. Gerhard Link (from Germany), Dr. Samadhi Rajapakse and Mrs. Kusum Wickramanayake.

Placing the pinnacle on the Cetiya with Madam Kusum Wickramanayake, wife of the Prime Minister - Olaboduwa Meditation Centre Opening Ceremony

The Shrine Room at the Olaboduwa Meditation Centre.

With my pupil Nun, Ven. Bhikkhuni Matale Medhavini

"A simple narrative to provide, if at all, some guidance and inspiration to women who seek an alternative lifestyle away from home and hearth."

These are the words of Bhikkuni Kusuma. It is the story of a daughter, a wife and a mother who became a teacher, a scholar and a Bhikkuni. Ordained at Sarnath where the Buddha preached his first sermon, during the course of a lifetime Bhikkuni Kusuma has devoted herself to re-establishing the order of Bhikkunis in Sri Lanka after1000 years and restoring it to the place, which it once enjoyed in ancient times.

Remembering this life, she speaks of an idyllic childhood and a happy home, a life sparkling with happiness and laughter, enriched by kindness and generosity. She also remembers the suffering and the pain, the loss of her daughter and then her son.

"The nature of life and living in the universe alas, changes continually and will eventually disintegrate and disappear...This is the true nature of the "Dharma of the universe."

This perhaps, is the real story behind her life. It is a moral which we should all seek to understand, for it applies to all of us.

SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda

BK 166413
VYB 011006
IC 600.00

ce: LKR 600.00

ISBN 978-955-0393-02-2

9 789550 393022

Akna

Akna Publishers

Printed by Karunaratne & Sons (Pvt) Ltd.